SPEAK TO THE EARTH

by SARAH COMSTOCK

REINDEL

SPEAK TO THE EARTH

BOOKS BY SARAH COMSTOCK

SPEAK TO THE EARTH
THE SODDY
THE VALLEY OF VISION
THE DAUGHTER OF HELEN KENT
OLD ROADS FROM THE HEART OF NEW YORK
MOTHERCRAFT

SPEAK TO THE EARTH

BY

SARAH COMSTOCK

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee;
and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee;
or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee.

THE BOOK OF JOB

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TO
L. S. C.

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PART I

REFUGEES FROM REALITY: THE FLIGHT

SPEAK TO THE EARTH

I

§

THE first gray pallor of dawn was creeping among the buttes. Slowly their forms emerged from the blackness of night as from the slime of some genesis; they crawled forth like prehistoric monsters—dinosaurs, ichthyosaurs—creatures of an ancient earth, immense, terrifying, elemental. As yet they were but faintly discernible—mere looming, shadowy forms in the midst of solitude and twilight.

For miles in all directions this stretch of the Bad Lands seemed an uninhabited world, vast as space itself. A frightful world such as Effie had never dreamed of; infinite hollow blackness paling to gray, and always, wherever she looked, the fantastic forms of the buttes. Scores of them, hundreds, hunching their primeval shoulders—these vanishing only to be replaced by others, more grotesque, more alarming, as the car sped on. She had an inarticulate sense of being projected into vacuity like a comet she had seen pictured on a Sunday Magazine Section's front page. Impotent victim of an unknown force, shot into no-

where. What did it mean, how had it all come about, what was happening to her, what was she in for? That, above all—*what was she in for?*

From the car's back seat she could see that the man in front was huddled over the wheel as though tired out. The man whom she had never seen before that night and to whose home she was now going. The man who had told her his name was Vic. From time to time she would glance at him curiously; then her eyes would fall shut from exhaustion; she would sway drowsily to the motion of the car. Muffled and wrapped, shapeless as a fowl upon its roost, her small cold nose buried itself, beak-wise, in the throat-opening of her garments. The warm rising scent of her own sweet body reassured her. No, she was not a comet. She was something less cosmic and nicer.

He pulled himself up as if at a sudden thought. He stopped the car and came around to her. "Might as well be comfortable," he muttered.

He had spoken to her at last! It was the first time since he had bundled her in there on the back seat, miles ago. She started, tried to rouse.

"I—I'm comf'table."

But he stripped off his sweater and rolled it up. She protested sleepily but he paid no heed. In his blunt, silent way he pulled her down upon the seat, stuffed the impromptu pillow under her head, and roughly tucked her in. "Like he'd tuck in a sack o' potatahs to keep it from rolling out," she thought dreamily.

The journey was full of alarms. An almost impassable road, dry now but trenched like a forsaken battlefield with the ruts of stormy seasons past. Once it took Vic twenty minutes to overcome a high centre. This done, she dozed, only to be jerked awake by a crunch, a skidding, the splash of icy drops upon her face. Sickeningly the car careened—they were driving through the river.

She clung desperately. All around, the dark hard sparkle of water. Then, with a lurch, the car panted up the farther bank.

Once or twice she tried to break the oppressive silence, but she could think of nothing to say. She was dazed by extreme fatigue and by the incredible situation. So she snuggled down again as if asleep. She was not, however, unless that drugged sensation were sleep—the sensation of looking on at all the events of the past twenty-four hours as a spectator looks on at the unreality of a play.

§

She saw herself, Effie Galpin, and she stared at this Effie in stupefaction. Effie Galpin, riding off behind this unknown man who didn't talk, didn't "pet," but offered her a home. Effie, but four days ago demonstrator of songs in a New York "Five and Ten," between which and her home in Newark, New Jersey, she had shuttled in drab ceaselessness. Four days ago. And now, since the last dawn, a stranger flung into the

middle of a Western wilderness. Small, weary, alone in the world, lost, penniless, desperate.

This Victor Trench was a down-and-out ex-service man, he had told her—one of the group who had tried to solve their post-war problem in Twentieth Century pioneering. "As much a scrap of drift as you are. Broke. Got a little good-for-nothing ranch with a log shanty, and that's all. Everything I raise dies. Tonight I came to the end—turned my back on the outfit—quit. But we're both in the same boat—might be an idea to drown together. I'll go back if you say so. If you want to go fifty-fifty on starving to death, come along."

§

His honesty was brutal—stark and harsh, like the plain. She always liked honesty. Maybe it had been that. And his profile—better than Richard Barthelmess's, sterner. Effie was incapable of analyzing the wheels within wheels of the psychologic mechanism which had pushed her into this mad act. But the sense of her rashness came over her suddenly like a chill, trickling thinly down her spine, foretaste of the icy plunge of realization soon to be. Still, however, she groped, dulled by the anæsthetics of despair and shock; still she looked on as an outsider looks. She was as yet far from her full awakening.

§

The thunder of heavier ruts. She roused, sat up. The road had taken to swinging in loops, in and out, weaving between the bluffs. On, from one aspect to another, ceaselessly shifting and yet always the same—always those same black monsters rising from infinite solitude.

All at once she peered sharply, leaning forward. Yes—she made it out—a house. A crude dwelling, but there in the solitude it looked little and soft, like a creature nestling. It was gray amid gray sagebrush in the gray night, and beside it was another gray blotch—sheep. She saw them stirring a bit, heard a young, querulous bleat rising from the mass—then an answer, old and soothing, as from one who had found out that life isn't worth worrying about, anyway.

Effie leaned farther from the car, eying the sheep and the house with closest attention. They seemed an oasis. The endless lonely road that had woven on as though it would never stop, would never arrive anywhere, had suddenly chanced upon a refuge. The sheep and the house seemed to sleep contentedly side by side as if some warm human bond held them. The animal odour came to her—ammoniacal, twanging.

No sign of a light was anywhere about the building, but she could make out the logs of its structure. She fumbled forth from her wrappings and laid a hand on Vic's sleeve. "Look!"

"What at?"

"It's a house!"

"Sure."

"It looks like—more than just a house. It's so—so cuddly. Like a—a home. Wisht we could stop an' see the sheep."

He half turned, and she saw a grim smile twist his lips, but he made no response. However, he drove directly up to the house. Still she did not guess; perhaps she had pictured something less humble, even despite his bitter honesty.

Barks sprang at them and a dog rushed forth, bounding about Vic's legs as he got out, standing upright to paw him and jump against him in a cyclone of welcome. He disentangled himself from the leaping caresses and clumsily helped her out. He went to the door.

There was no walk or porch—only a wooden box lying flat to form a step. He opened the unlocked door and walked straight into the house; she saw that he lighted a lamp on the table. Then he came to the door and waited.

"Come on in," he said at length. He pushed the ubiquitous dog aside with a foot, but not unkindly. "Look out the way there, Blighty, you rag-tailed mutt."

It was not until then that Effie took it in.

"So—we're home," she said faintly.

She stood for a long dumb moment staring in through the narrow doorway. A vision of barren disorder, of lean poverty; upon the bare deal table a shadeless oil lamp, its nickel bowl greasy and dotted with adhering insects; its rays flowing upward, washing in a pale flood

over the clean-cut, unyielding jaw, the masterful nose, the brooding brow, the inscrutable eyes of a face that as yet she barely knew.

"Yes—we're home," she heard him mutter. . . . His incredible height . . . She made no move. Her body was powerless to go forward although she told it to. The greasy lamp bowl with the insects held her gaze senselessly, Her eyes rose to his—fell.

This house, which a few minutes before had seemed a home, passed through swift metamorphosis to horror. What was she doing here? At this strange dwelling, with this strange morose man? In that instant she saw the whole thing as a hideous joke perpetrated by some ribald crew of gods—it wasn't real, it couldn't be, it was a scary dream from which she must wake up. . . .

She turned. Behind, the infinite gray wilderness in which she had wandered, lost. But it was less terrifying than this. Her gaze swung back to the lighted doorway, the man waiting. . . . If he were not so tall. . . . Should she flee? Should she stay? Everything began to go around in crazy whirlings, like forms in an old kaleidoscope she had once seen—buttes, the sky, the plain, the man waiting at his door. . . .

Again a stirring among the sheep; again that bleat, young, querulous. But this time there was no comforting reply.

II

§

VICTOR TRENCH was one of the ex-service men who, within the first half-decade after the World War, sought to solve their problem in the unbroken West. Along with hundreds of others who returned to find themselves adrift, he had thought to start life anew by pioneering.

Here and there, in regions where wilderness still exists, the government was offering land and the young man of to-day was being urged to go West and grow up with the country. The Shoshone project in Wyoming and scattered districts in other states were widely described; they were still unclaimed and waiting; irrigation, dry-farming, and go-get-it-ive-ness were to make the desert blossom as the rose. Placards were posted, setting forth golden rewards that awaited the Twentieth Century pioneer. The old westward-ho mania seized upon drifters of this modern era, and a boom set in. The fabled times of old bade fair to be relived.

Even to this day, when the bucking broncho has yielded to the Ford car, when the rodeo is a feature of movie and circus ring rather than of plains life, there still inheres a strange spell in that magic name, the

"West." Somehow, the setting sun is ever veiled in clouds of golden glamour. The enchantment of mystery beckons from that distant land, no matter how many agricultural, educational, meteorological, irrigational, hygienic, and conservational wiseacres cut it up into blue and pink blobs on a map and stick pins into them.

The tragic history of those ex-service men's experiment has never been fully told. Perhaps the fault lay on one side, perhaps the other, probably it was a well-intentioned mistake of both. Some of the lands were so worthless that the most skilful and indefatigable farmer who ever tilled soil could have wrung not a bushel from them. Some of the boys who flocked thither were so indolent that the richest soil on earth would have yielded not a bushel to them. There was over-optimism on both sides; there was stupendous blundering; there was folly, and weak despair; there was fiasco. The boys said that "it cost more to live in such a hell of a place than in New York, because they spent so much gasoline getting away from it," and the old farmers retorted that "ridin' to pitcher shows an' dances never growed a crop o' wheat yit." The boys called the irrigation project a scandal; said they were charged outrageously for water, and that their farms were drowned for them after all their toil. Authorities reported that "every boy turns bolshevist the minute the least thing goes wrong." In a land so difficult, where the utmost skill can hardly bring about profitable results short of

five years, it was rash to expect a group of young men without capital—former dentists, icemen, salesmen of dry goods or groceries, soda-fountain servitors, waiters, chauffeurs, milkmen, or stenographers—to achieve success. On their part, many were ne'er-do-weels, claiming that the world owed them a living and expecting nature to plant, harrow, and thresh their crops for them. Many, on the other hand, strove like soldiers against an overwhelming force, and their tragedy is as brave and pitiful as that of the more spectacular and famous heroes of the old West.

The blame be where you like. But the typical tragedy of the ex-service pioneer may be read, for instance, in one view of desolate Frannie Flat. Fancy, a few years ago, pictured those miles as purple and yellow with the alfalfa and wheat to be; conjured up long-armed stackers reaching to clutch the wealth of hay, while huge stacks brooded in fields abloom; breathed the cut clover that was to weight the air with its scent. Fact showed us Frannie Flat a few seasons later, a blotched and leprous desert almost uninhabited; barren, alkali-spotted; here and there a one-time doughboy's deserted shack standing like the marker at a grave.

§

Victor Trench had been born within the clamping repression of a stony New England farm. His home was one of those few remaining strongholds of bigotry, held in the rack of isolation while poverty applied the thumb-

screw. His nature was shy, wild, repressed, mutinous, inscrutable; he broke bonds at puberty and ran away.

His family were uneducated, but in his lonely life he had devoured books, and college was his dream. He spent several years in earning and hoarding to materialize that dream, and at last was admitted to a freshman class.

That year was a feast to his ravenous young mind. He made but two or three friends; with his books he would stride off to his lair. But while his intellect had become civilized, his manners remained savage. In defence of our anthropoid relatives, he quarrelled with the president of the college, whose family tree was rooted in the Garden of Eden and whose Fundamentalism was written even in the manner in which he clasped his plump little hands over his plumper little stomach and stated, "*That* is the *decision* of the Faculty"—meaning himself. Vic's lack of friends left him unsupported. He was expelled. Like a wild creature he went, furious and silent.

The descendant of Eden had slain an upspringing young ambition, and the boy's college dream lay dead. But he set to work, found a position with a company manufacturing agricultural implements, and moved steadily upward. He made good.

Then came the war. He was in France among the first.

Like a multitude of others, he returned after the Armistice to a demolished world. He had had his

groove and had been adjusted to it. He returned to find groove and adjustment both wiped out. Something was gone and he couldn't get it back. It was far more than a job; it was orientation. He stood dazed at first; fumbled, stumbled; then headed toward wreck.

He became a drifter, snatching at any work that offered, casting it aside. He worked in a Pennsylvania dairy, in a Kansas wheatfield, on a California cherry ranch. He bummed his way on freight cars, he travelled from job to job. He stoked coal on a coast vessel; he joined a circus as the wild man in the pit and so realized the part that the other performers were afraid of him. Purpose there was none, he was like a torn newspaper in a gale.

He had always been a solitary, too anti-social for dissipation, taciturn, detesting women, liked by only the few men who had interested him and to whom he unlocked himself in occasional fits of long, animated talk. These few, however, had been men of intelligence and character. But now the only companions he sought were dissolute. His taciturnity darkened into moroseness, broken at times by flares of a reckless and bitter gaiety. In these wild moods he would drink, gamble, frequent dance halls. He was typical enough: a broken, tossed bit of the wreckage of war.

§

There came a year when he heard of the westward-ho movement. He had just won at poker, and the whim

seized him to go. Arriving at the Bad Lands, someone offered him a small sheep ranch for a bargain, and, as he had the money, he decided to buy this ranch instead of taking up government land farther on; it was all his, from the shearing pen to the teaspoons. The owner sold it because "the doctor told him that his wife might go insane if she stayed there any longer, and he knew danged well, without no doctor to tell him, that he would himself, anyhow. They were from Ioway, and one thing about Ioway, the ki-otes never howl there at night, because there ain't none to howl." The man, however, did not mention any drawbacks to Vic, but told him that the ranch was the coming centre of the sheep-producing industry of North America.

Vic replied, "You're a liar, but here's the cash. I might as well commit suicide by jumping off into a sage-brush wilderness as into the middle of the Yellowstone Falls."

His words were unthinking, but that was, in fact, what actuated him—the suicidal impulse of escape making a leap in the dark. How much farther this impulse was to be goaded did not at first appear.

The Iowan looked at him and shook his head. "I dunno," was his comment.

Trench was fantastically tall, erect, lean, strong as steel wire. His black hair grew in a crest like that of some wild bird, making him appear even taller. His face was powerfully chiselled, his eyes not to be read. Clad for the West, in black shirt, khaki trousers, broad felt

hat adorned with a brilliant red feather which he had plucked from a bird in Central America and a silver ornament given him by an Indian in Alaska, he looked exotic and dangerous.

"I dunno," repeated the Iowan, and again shook his head.

§

The small rude log house was enough for Vic's bachelor needs, and he moved in with the one companion that a devastating Fate had left him—Blighty, the mongrel who had been his chum overseas. Whatever merit the beast possessed lay not in beauty. He had squat legs, a chin beard, a ragged body, and an abbreviated tail like a dead twig. The tail's end had remained in France; it may be found to-day in a barbed-wire entanglement just beyond that long north road in the Argonne.

For a while Vic threw himself into ranching with spirit. Sheep were a novel problem, and he fell upon it as an athlete upon a punch bag. It was good to tussle. He loaded himself with instructions from the state experts, sat far into the nights beside an oil lamp studying their bulletins and letters. He rebuilt the pens, learned to mix dip that he might be ready for tick, studied castration and docking, talked (to Blighty) of shearing methods, breeds, feed values, and lambing.

Here was his chance to make good at last, he told himself. He was far from temptation—Minoleum, the

nearest town, was twenty-seven miles away. He was starting afresh, washing the slate clean, going to live a decent, healthful life close to the soil. People talked about the ex-service man being a down-and-outer. He'd show 'em a thing or two.

With such thoughts he blazed and toiled under the cold brilliance of spring skies. Then one stillborn lamb after another appeared, and many ewes were stricken and died. He had but a handful of youngsters to show for the entire lambing season. He fell like a dead weight.

He began to find excuses for trips into town. Letters of advice from the Experiment Station lay unread. When at home, he would sit idle for long periods, motionless, mired in his broodings. At times he would jerk himself out of the mire and set off in his Ford, running it wildly for miles, with no objective and no heed of the wanton waste of gasoline.

With every week, matters grew worse. The losses among his sheep increased, due to sickness and coyotes. Discouragement paved the way for despair. Alone as he was (except for occasional evenings spent in town with a group of pimply young men who wore red and green sweaters and cultivated a spray of hair which jetted forward over the brow), his thoughts took on diseased distortions. Vital matters shrivelled like limbs, trivial ones swelled to the size of abscesses. The broodings increased. More and more he would sit motionless, with that feeling of his body being too heavy

to stir. It was then that he took to handling the derringer.

§

This toy had been given him long ago by one of his few college friends and he had kept it for that reason. Here, in the land of one-time wild-and-wooliness, it was as incongruous a trifle as a lace fan. The true Westerner regards it with as much respect as he does a child's slingshot for magpies. When Vic happened to show it to Ulysses Pinker, that veteran had hissed with scorn: "'Twouldn't kill a hen!"

"Wouldn't it!" Vic had retorted. "All right—there's an old fowl that I'm wanting for dinner tomorrow—let's see!" He shot. The hen gave a quawk of shocked surprise because he didn't wring her neck in the proper manner, and dropped dead.

"Aw! That there hen jus' had a sudden heart failure!" Uly declared. "She died of her own accord!" And he stoutly maintained that the weapon never could have done the work, even while enjoying her second joint at Vic's table the next day.

Vic would smile at this memory while he fingered the derringer. He would sit beside the deal table and turn it over and over, watching the play of the pearl's iridescence, feeling the metal's cool sleekness. Then, with an abrupt jerk that was like taking himself by the collar, he would open the table drawer and thrust it in—cram it back—smother it among the letters and pipes and

pamphlets and match boxes and blotters and rusty pens and sheep-raising bulletins. Back, out of sight, as far as he could stuff it.

When he began to realize that this was happening more and more often, he decided to take the sheep off for a long stay. The instinct of self-preservation prompted this move. The change, he thought, and camp life in the wagon might do him good. He had tried but twenty-four hours of it when he found that this was worse than the log house. Lonely as that was, it had come to be familiar—it was something to hold to. These abrupt dark mountains with their bristling growth of rigid firs held him at arm's length, like a hostile stare.

Nevertheless, although the mountains grew more hostile with every day, lifting their eyebrows, rearing their heads more coldly, he stuck it out. He stayed from home for a month. During this time his flock, already small, diminished alarmingly. The money that shearing had brought in had gone for debt, and bankruptcy loomed near. He turned back. No good.

He was returning to his log house on the day before he first met Effie Galpin.

III

§

STRANGE happenings and the Overland Limited had brought Effie Galpin to the Bad Lands, where the latter had dumped her like a mail bag and made off.

To begin with, Effie was nobody at all. She had been flung into life some nineteen years before; her parents, having got her into the scrape of being born, had promptly, as she recounted, "died on her." A young woman named Mrs. Whelpley had "given her a home" in Newark, which fact she stated with a self-satisfaction that amounted fairly to a licking of spiritual chops. The truth of this was that Effie went only now and then to school, was seldom allowed time for wage-earning, and toiled unpaid for Mrs. Whelpley. She was useful for the disagreeable tasks, such as cleaning deposit from the ice box, slicing onions, washing the dripping-pan, and doing unpleasant things for babies.

At length, after the war, Effie had made an attempt to strike out "on her own." But at that time the economic situation was submerging. The housing problem for working girls was beyond solution. She had wits and determination, but she was too young, too

untrained to swim. She was washed back to Mrs. Whelpley's shore. For another year she continued to scour frying-pans, and do up sour-smelling bibs, and squeeze orange juice, and give enemas while infants howled and battled on their bellies, and powder little red chafings with stearate of zinc as the clinic taught. Dishpan, diapers, diapers, dishpan. . . .

Neither by heritage nor by rearing was Effie entitled to what society is pleased to call "morals." Her parents had overlooked the detail of a ring, and as for Mrs. Whelpley, marriage had chanced her way and she had accepted it; but she would have found a home without the adornment of a framed certificate equally acceptable. Effie herself was undisturbed by questions as to this matter; simply, they had never concerned her. There was a certain innate pudicity in her nature; moreover, sex slumbered late. She scorned suitors, honourable and otherwise alike. Disgruntled young men whose cheek-dancing failed of results grumbled that she was "no petter." She threw herself into the dance with pagan abandonment, but she was as innocently graceful as a nymph at play. "No molasses," one youth complained, and truly. To a subtler taste, however, there was a fine salty flavour, a tang to tempt; and one could only guess at what the rich full sweetness of the inner kernel might be.

Her most ardent and honourable admirer, ever seeking her in matrimony, was one Mr. Handy, owner of a little grocery which somehow managed to defy the

"chain stores" and thrive audaciously. Mr. Handy had a flat above the store; to Effie, luxurious: rose plush chairs and a complete dinner set. He besought her to adorn it forever. She broke into immoderate laughter and ran like a troll at dawn.

Effie wore cheap finery because the girls she knew did so. Her clothing was so tight that breasts and little round buttocks were in evidence. She had not the faintest idea that she and thousands of others were wearing revelatory garments and extravagant rouge as an obscure but profound reaction to war. It was the female's instinctive attempt to meet excessive competition in a world suddenly decimated of males. She had no inkling of the talk going on concerning the biology of the matter—how it was being recalled that every great war had been followed by an epidemic of cosmetics—that after the Thirty Years' War the women of Europe had gone mad for rouge. Effie merely followed the vogue, ignorant of its source, ignorant of any seeking within herself. As yet passion had never been roused to consciousness.

§

What this little Cinderella *was* conscious of was a burning desire for life. Gaiety, variety, a stir, colour, sparkle, adventure. Anything but this hideous drab monotony. She possessed an untrained thrushlike voice and occasionally earned a bit with it; at last a

"Five and Ten" employed her to sit at a piano in the basement and "demonstrate" new songs. Thereafter, life became a shuttle that wove between the "Five and Ten" in New York and her so-called sister's home in Newark. Day in, day out. Warbling, "I sit and dream of you by dusk." Buttoning up Mrs. Whelpley's eldest three. Warbling, buttoning, buttoning, warbling. Dishpan, diapers, diapers, dishpan.

That was life. That was reality. It was a jail that walled her in, against which she beat until she was bruised. There was only one thing to do: escape.

She was but one in a world thronged with these refugees—the runaways from reality. In fantasy, in drink, in sex, in drugs, in pseudo-religion, in debauching literature, in sodden despair, in suicide—by dark paths or by those falsely glittering—they scatter; frantic, fleeing; anything to get away from the dread face of the real. They are men and women, old and young. The statistics of the Travellers' Aid and the Police Bureaus will tell you how many thousand Effie Galpins there are per year, among them, and the appalling rate at which their number is growing. These girls are seldom the victims of melodramatic villains; they are the little refugees who voluntarily flee hither and thither to escape the drab face of Life as They Find It.

People talked about the West—it was up-and-coming, a girl could make a lot of money there, they said. Everyone she knew who had been there agreed that it

was "some place." An acrobatic pair; a drummer; a mining man; a lady who travelled fitting eyeglasses. Some place. She dwelt upon it; the West grew to be her goal.

At length, chance threw Miss Blum in her path. Miss Blum was a real-estate promoter, large, glorified by henna, with a voice that pushed you back into the corner. She came often to the "Five and Ten" to sell the floor manager corner lots in a Northwestern town named Owensly Junction. "Say, it's the coming metropolis of the plains, I'll tell the world," she said.

One day Effie put in a shy question. "Do you s'pose I—I—could get a job there singing?" She trembled with fear and hope.

"*Could* you!" boomed Miss Blum. "Why, kiddie, you couldn't count the jobs you'd turn down! Out there they throw money on the floor to see the vacuum cleaner take it up." She glanced to make sure the manager heard. Of course, she wouldn't have bothered with Effie, but this pleasantry might impress him.

"I—I'd like to broadcast, too," Effie ventured.

Miss Blum clapped her on the shoulder. "You said it! There's the most promising radio station in the West right there." She glanced again; yes, the manager was listening. "Say, you ask for the Premier Western Plains—KPWP—and say Maudie Blum sent you. You'll be their star feature before Mountain Time ketches up to Eastern." Miss Blum hugged herself; she hadn't thought of a radio station before, but it was

a prime suggestion. At once she added it to the assets of Owensly Junction.

§

But it was not Miss Blum who had lured Effie Galpin to the Bad Lands. It was Effie herself; all the elements that went to make her up.

In part it was her nose, with its pointed, terrier-like way of sniffing into adventure. A nose like that could never have remained permanently in a static state. Then, too, it was her curly lips, sensitive to a degree, played upon by countless shifting and conflicting emotions. It was her light-brown hair with its flicker of gold and impertinence of wave—dull, straight hair could never have entered upon any such imaginative enterprise as to prepare a song-monologue feature to present to KPWP under the announcement of "Rose of the Plains." It was her firm chin, carrying through what her imaging determined. Above all, it was her eyes—wide apart, of a blue that was less a colour than a radiance, like that of the planet Venus. Eyes that dreamed long dreams, that ached even while they laughed, that reached out toward a world where things come true. No, it was not Miss Blum, although she had been the chance agent who focussed Effie's plans. It was Effie herself who had brought all this about; Effie and her caged youth and her wing-beatings and her bedizened dreams.

Experience, added to native clear-headedness, had

made her both practical and wise. Had she seen another girl entering upon this wild-goose chase, she would have called her "a sucker." But, sooner or later, we each pass through our own Fool's Paradise. She knew she was rash to buy a ticket with all her little hoardings and set off for such a goal; but she took all she knew and stuffed it into a dark closet of the mind and turned the key upon it. It was there, but she didn't let herself look.

"Rose o' the Plains, Rose o' the Plains." It sang itself over and over. . . . Only a few days more. . . . "Rose o' the Plains." . . .

She packed her wardrobe in one suitcase, left a note for Mrs. Whelpley, and departed secretly to avoid a scene. "Rose o' the Plains." . . .

And so had begun the adventures of Effie Galpin, late of Newark, New Jersey. She was one of the commonplaces of modern America—the girl who resents the dullness of reality and flees in search of life's lustre. She has broken the chains of the past, she dares to strike out alone; but she has not learned that the road to dreams-made-real is a long one and a dusty. Effie was a molecule, an atom of unimportance. Paradoxically, she was, as a type, one of the most important and alarming problems which our overgrown, long-legged, rapid-running, adolescent nation has to face.

IV

§

SHE was almost there.

With the first sign of dawn she had been awake, peering eagerly from the window of the day coach. Amid the snores of men and women, the reek of the ill-ventilated car, she shone like a small night light. Here, among the impecunious, she had spent three nights in cat naps, her head upon her matting suitcase; by day she had subsisted upon stale cheese sandwiches and triangles of Martha Washington pie packed in a shoe box. But even these conditions were powerless to quench that conflagration of hope.

"Nearly there!" she would breathe from time to time. "It can't be but a few minutes now! Oh, say, when I see that metroplus all of a sudden shining out the dark like Coney Island——!"

Her three-cornered face with its big eager eyes was pressed against the pane until her nose was cold. She could see the nose, flattened and whitish like a bit of dough. From time to time she would blow upon the pane and rub it with a green handkerchief, and, making

a telescope of her travel-grimed hands, she would strain still more intently, breathlessly watching every flying mile.

"Gee, we must be nearly there!" she would tell herself again. . . . "Them hills are the limit!" Buttes were rising through the lonely dawn. "That annymal at the circus didn't have anything on *them*—the one with two heads, two humps an' a trunk. . . . Why *don't* we get there? . . . Oh, my gracious, something inside me is sure going to 'xplode! It *hurts*, I'm so happy!"

It actually did hurt; she spread her hands over her breast, pressing it, striving to force down that caged thing which beat so agonizingly, like a bird mad for flight.

§

Effie was a slip of a creature, with movements that were graceful not from art but because they were the spontaneous expression of tingling life. She was dressed after the manner in which her social stratum mirrors distortedly the fashions of an upper; a plaid "sports" skirt strained over her form; a light-green sweater woven of a fibre that simulated silk; flesh-coloured stockings of the same material, and the ornate green shoes which were a vogue of that particular year. Her hair, gold-brown and silky, was rendered grotesque in a bushy uprearing bob suggesting the coiffure of a Hottentot—another of the same season's hysterias.

Green glass earrings escaped from under it and dangled with her ceaseless movement.

Yet through all this extrinsic tawdriness, glimpses of something finer might be caught. Whether some remote current of heredity flowed through that of environment. . . . An instinct of daintiness showed in the way she strove from time to time to smoothe her rumpled clothes, tidy her hair, protect her trim white collar by tucking in a handkerchief, brush the cinders from window sill and red plush seat with a little whisk broom. She handled whatever she touched with a certain fastidiousness, as does a cat. Even the combined black and white of soot and face powder could not quite conceal the delicacy of a transparent skin through which the pink and blue and mauve veining showed as through that of a child. Under its red salve, the real mouth was exquisitely tender, tucked into corners that were surprisingly resistant. The lips were incised in delicious little upcurves as was the entire face, a face that flamed, now, like a blown lamp.

"Owensly Junction—the metroplus, Miss Blum said. I s'pose it'll jus' pop right out o' the middle o' nowhere, 'lectric lights, palatial residences, an' all. When I see it, *I*'ll say I'll jump right into the middle o' nex' week!" Her face flared; her pupils dilated until the blue eyes became shining onyx. "When I see it"—she paused to gather force for what was her supreme interjection—"*my lollipop!*" she cried.

§

The metropolis did not pop, however, and for once the chill of misgiving shot through her veins. It was the hour of vitality's lowest ebb. She shuddered at the sombre solitude, peopled only by the fantastic buttes—gargoyles, mastodons, demons, unimagined beasts. Like a nightmare of some strange planet. . . . But misgiving passed as swiftly as it had come. Once more hungry delight took possession.

"When I walk into KPWP and tell 'em about 'Rose o' the Plains,'" she murmured to her reflection, "somebody'll be sitting up taking notice! KPWP's going to reach every city, village, an' ranch in the Northwest, Miss Blum says. An' I'll be famous wherever I'm on the air. . . . 'Rose o' the——'"

A bellow rent the car. "O—wan—zy Jongggggg!"

§

Effie sprang to her feet. The remarkable cacophony must be "Owensly Junction" in conductorese. Snatching her belongings, she dashed down the aisle, the hard corner of her suitcase bruising her thigh as she ran. She could not see any town, but it must be just ahead. Oh, she could not bear the pounding of that hope within her breast! . . . "Hurry up!" The conductor was snatching her bag. She reached the platform. And even before she looked with her physical eyes, the vision filled her mind: broad, tree-lined boulevard, proud

houses, clustering lights like fruit, herself in the midst of it all, a petted idol of radio fame. . . .

She raised her eyes. "But this—this can't be it!"

"This is Owensly Junction, I tell you!" the conductor snapped. "You been askin' for it every ten minutes. Well, ain't you goin' to get off?"

A wave of sickening fear surged over Effie. She reached blindly for the rail. What did it all mean? A tiny group of unpainted houses huddled like cold sheep on a plain—one lank cottonwood tree—one lank old man like the tree, who loafed and spat and wore a gaudy neckerchief and a broad high hat such as Effie had seen in Wild West movies and associated with deeds of terror. For the rest, the vast dim solitude. . . .

Her knuckles stood out, strained white knobs, as she clung to the platform rail. "But this—this can't be it! There's some mistake. It can't——"

"Are you goin' to get off or ain't you?" fumed the conductor. Waiting impatiently on the gravel below, he held her suitcase, switching it back and forth as an angry cat switches its tail. "Dee-cide!"

The train was snorting and pawing to be off. "I—can't——" Effie's voice was swallowed in the wave of terror which surged over her. Seconds stretched, to her dazed mind, into hours of agonized indecision. . . . A tremor thrilled the train—it was starting. The conductor gave a final indignant jounce of her suitcase down upon the gravel, and the suggestion implicit in

the act tipped the balance. Her response was automatic. His hand out——

"Jump!"

And Effie Galpin jumped—into her destiny.

§

The train was gone. A black snake, it glided into nowhere. And Effie, watching it, found herself lost and alone.

For already she knew that there was false play. She knew it perfectly, in that substratum of consciousness where the truth (or some measure of it) abides. But the upper stratum went on functioning after its manner, following out logically the false line of the apparent.

"I—I'm looking for Owensly Junction, the metroplus," she said, turning fearfully to the tall old man in the alarming garb. Her voice fluttered like that frightened thing in her breast. "It—I—I'm to go to the broadcasting station—I—don't understand—Owensly Junction was going to be a grand city where I could make a lotta money singing——"

The gaunt old man looked down upon her as you would expect a gnarled old tree to look down. He cleared his throat, spat, jammed his hands into his pockets, took them out, and spoke.

"Well, miss, that sounds like one them ferry tales as the onscrupalous Easterner tells to bait suckers. Owensly Junction's a growin' place, to be sure, as you see before you, but it ain't growed past seven houses,

twenty-eight folks an' nine dogs. Who give you that information, might I inquire?"

"A lady 'at was in New York selling land—Miss Blum."

Surprise, then comprehension, pity, indignation, chivalry all passed over the old plainsman's face as he looked down upon the small chilled frightened solitary figure in the flimsy green sweater and the custard-cup hat. A goldish lock escaped from under the brim, quirking like a pitiful question mark. . . . The old man gulped.

"Say, you pore little onhatched chick! That Blum woman's a scoundrel! I'd like to see the East take care its own rough characters. Us folks in the West got a high standard o' conduck to maintain. Why, Maudie Blum's one o' the dirtiest rascals ever made the vital mistake o' livin' to grow up 'thout gittin' kilt. If she wuz a man, she'd 'a' et lead fur breakfas' long ago. She makes her livin' sellin' corner lots where there ain't no corners. So she's done you, has she?"

"She was selling the floor manager some land, and I asked her——"

Effie was interrupted by a local train which shot in at that moment. The old man started toward it, hesitated——

"Say, here's the Jack Rabbit—I gotta take it to the nex' town. Almighty Smoke, but I hate to leave you like this—but I got to." . . .

From the platform he called back: "You go up to

them houses, an' the women folks'll look after you." He and the Jack Rabbit were gone.

Now, in remembrance, his terrifying garb was overlooked. Effie recalled him as a lost and needed friend, and a new surge of aloneness swept over her. She turned toward the slumbering houses which he had pointed out; they seemed rude and strange. Nevertheless, she would have approached them in her dismay had not a new figure at that moment flashed into view. Against the barren drab of the melancholy scene, its vivid colour shot like a tanager. Crimson in the gray of dawn, its beauty stabbed, but Effie was insensible to everything but fear. Her lips parted, her breath stopped, her mind stood transfixed by the most frightful being that she had ever seen outside the movies. It was a real Indian—blanket, feathers, war paint, and all. Effie had been educated, like the most of young America, in the school of the screen; she believed that she faced at last a deadly enemy.

§

Rufus Snake Head, having attended an orderly festival at the Reservation, was on his way home. He was a harmless old Gros Ventre who welcomed any excuse to don the costume of his father, a one-time doughty warrior; it gratified his inferiority complex, which suffered from Mrs. Rufus's habit of chastising him with a potato masher. But to Effie he represented only terror.

He was coming straight toward her. His headdress of tall feathers nodded, his red blanket blazed, his strings of shining ankle bells cut the air with a penetrating clangour.

A second Effie stood paralyzed; then, with no more idea of whither than dust in the gale, she fled.

§

It was long before she paused from sheer exhaustion. In the distance she saw the Indian; a moment more, and he had glimmered away into nowhere, a vanishing spot of colour, like some great bird that seeks its own secret places of the wilderness. The settlement, the railroad, were far behind. She was alone, in such solitude as she had never conceived. No road, not even a trail was in sight. Virgin sagebrush surrounded her, buttes hemmed her in. She had completely lost her orientation; she could no more have retraced her steps than she could have solved a labyrinth. A glow in the sky proclaimed the east, which to her meant Newark, New Jersey; but the mere knowledge was of no more use to her than a compass in his trousers' pocket is to the shipwrecked voyager clinging to a punctured life-preserver. Exhausted by her long running, she sank upon a boulder and strove to grasp the situation.

It was still chaotic, but a few salient points stood out. She had the clothes upon her back and no more. Her suitcase, she recalled, had been dropped as she fled. She felt for a lump at the back of her left stocking; yes,

her change purse was still there, but she was disappointed to find in it only what she expected—a few small coins. Even in a wilderness, money erects the illusion of a bulwark. A thermos bottle, filled with tea, remained clutched in a hand; so, too, a vanity case. The irony of the latter brought a contorted smile to her lips.

She groped about in her consciousness, hunting out her various disasters as a battle victim feels his body over for wounds. This much she made out; she was alone; she was practically penniless; she was friendless in a strange country; and she was hopelessly lost.

V

§

EFFIE sat upon the boulder in the belief that she was thinking out her problem. As a matter of fact, her mind was merely lying prostrate while recollections and forebodings tore over it in a stampede. Pounding out chords in the "Five and Ten". . . . Buttoning up the children. . . . "Yes, madam, this song is well adapted to a high voice." . . . The way the dishwater at Mrs. Whelpley's went gray with floating dabs of grease. . . . The smelly coach full of open-mouthed sleepers. . . . Her bubble-coloured dream of a sparkling city which had become a huddle of dry-goods boxes on a bare plain. . . . The war-painted Indian—as in a dream, the savage changed—his hair became henna—he turned into Miss Blum. . . .

Ah, Miss Blum! Maudie Blum! Effie roused to the name as to a battle summons.

Her fists clenched. Tense, fierce lines drew her face. Beast, liar, brute, scoundrel, thief! These and more came rushing to her tongue, and there, with only the waste to hear, she spat them out. She struck at the imaged Miss Blum; beat with her fists at the face—a

voluble, pushing, shameless face that talked, ceaselessly talked, shoving its lies, one on top of another, down your throat.

As a matter of fact, Miss Blum had never thought of leading Effie so far, and she could have had no object in doing so. The lies she had told had been solely to impress the manager. She had fancied the girl's queries idle, and had at once forgotten them and the girl, having merely snapped at the chance to add a radio station to the already glowing picture of her metropolis. But to Effie, Miss Blum was now Mephisto incarnate. On she raged, beating, vituperating at the image which her fury conjured up. There was nothing in birth or breeding to impose restraint. Her resentment was as direct as that of a cat who snarls at the door that has pinched its tail. She belonged to a world that vents its emotions in words, if not in blows, and although she would not have employed her fists upon Miss Blum in person as she did upon this mental effigy, that romancer would have been treated to every epithet, and possibly more, had she been present in the flesh. . . . Sudden distress of indigestion followed the chemical effect of rage. Her violence, which was fear distorted, convulsed her like a spasm.

All at once it died out. It was spent. She found herself sitting on a boulder in the midst of the Bad Lands, with a new and amazing sense of cool clarification. The climax of anger had purged her mind and passed. Her rigid muscles relaxed; she drew a long

breath. And now at last she was able to think; able to see the situation as it was, unbefogged by wrath or panic. And she summed it up in one word, and that word was addressed to herself:

"*Sucker!*"

For she knew now that she had known all along that Miss Blum was lying—only she had not let herself look at what she knew. This was why she had unquestioningly accepted the statement of the old plainsman. He had told her only what she might have told herself. She had never felt a doubt of the promoter's fraud from the instant that he named it to her. She knew that she had heard the ring of a bad coin in Maudie Blum's every statement, only she had stopped her ears. She knew that she had been a little fool, that she had followed the trumpery of her own gaudy desires as the lustful follow a falsely promising whore. She knew that she had all along known that there was no magnificent city or a Premier Western Plains Broadcasting Station, and that she had never expected the world's applause as "Rose of the Plains." And yet she had come more than two thirds of the continent in obedience to the wish that it were true.

"Effie Galpin, you're an *all-day* sucker!"

It was her final comment. It was the last clod thrown upon the coffin of the past. And now, what about the present?

§

She looked around. At the instant of doing so, as if in response to some call within her, there came a burst of light. The sun was rising. Conflagration swept the east, burning arms shot up, gesticulated, like those of the eternally dying in an inferno. Molten fire poured in torrents over the earth.

Effie rose. She did not know, or even wonder, why. She snatched off the custard-cup hat. She did not know why she did this, either. Some instinct of worship, it seemed—pagan, innate—seized her in the presence of that sight. It left her inarticulate. She was mute with marvel.

For the dark monsters of a shadowy, dreadful genesis had vanished. Instead of them rose vast buildings of fantastic splendour painted in a hundred hues. Castles, temples, fortresses, mosques, minarets towered against a dazzling sky, rearing their walls and spires, rose and blood-red, indigo and mauve and hyacinthine, emerald and vermilion and ochre. The plain had become an illimitable city of colour, its buttes some superb architecture devisable by the gods alone.

She turned slowly, gazing upon this side, upon that. Vague blue and purple shapes against the sun; vivid and varied definiteness of colour and form opposite. Awe, august beauty, new marvel on every hand. Still she was inarticulate, but from the muteness of her astonishment instinct groped for expression. It pushed up in her throat; she wanted to cry, or to sing—to let loose that feeling that pushed so hard.

Courage was native to her. And at length it was asserting itself. She found voice. She did not choose a medium; she simply opened her throat like a bird and gave vent to the first song that came. It was a ditty which prevailed that season wherever there were lips to whistle or phonographs to wheeze:

"Yes, we have no bananas,
We have no—bananas—to-day!"

It is safe to venture that this primeval world had never before heard the lines and was unimpressed now. But to Effie they brought fortitude to endure the present, valour to face the future. And they gave release to that huge, shoving sensation under her shirt-waist.

So, standing there, facing the east, she sang through from beginning to end this very long song.

It was Effie Galpin's hymn to the dawn.

§

When the day was far along, Effie was still trudging as she had been doing since daybreak. Sometimes she found faint wheel ruts and would follow them for a while, only to lose them in the blank stretch of unbroken sagebrush. Every muscle ached. The high heels of her green shoes were bent inward; long "runs" had wrought traceries in her stockings where the thorny desert weeds had caught them; her skirt was torn, and a snarled loop of ravelled thread hung from the sleeve

of the green sweater. Her hair was rumpled and uncovered because her hat had fallen into an arroyo and she had feared to tempt snakes by going after it. She still clung to thermos bottle and vanity case.

All day she had roamed thus, resting when overcome by fatigue, rising to lash herself on once more. Surely she must reach a farmhouse; she had never heard of "the country" devoid of farmhouses. And yet the tar-paper shack was the only dwelling she had seen.

A bent stovepipe had been sticking up through its roof, its tar-paper coat had been loose, flapping in the wind. When Effie stood on tiptoe to peep in through the one small window, she had at first thought that the room was stripped entirely. But a spot of colour caught her eye. On the floor in the corner lay a rag doll in a red calico dress.

That was all the deserting homesteader had left—a broken-down shack, a blotch of once-ploughed and sterile earth, and a rag doll. Effie felt as though she had stumbled upon a corpse.

She was famished now. Search had brought forth a cake of chocolate from a sweater pocket and a wafer of mint chewing gum from the vanity case. These, with the tea, had constituted her day's menus.

"If I could have one cheese sandwich I could be as brave as Joan of Arc or the bob-hair gun-girl," she sighed. But the manna of a cheese sandwich did not descend. Night, however, did. The shadows of the buttes were stretching with a slow decisiveness of move-

ment as feline as that of a jungle creature; she could see them move; another instant, and they would reach out a paw to snatch her. She must hurry. A pang shot through one foot—through the other. She was hurting all over. With a groan, she drew off the tight green shoes; her feet had puffed in a pattern that followed their fantastic straps.

"If I stick here, it'll be pitch night." She fought to her feet again. On, fleeing, farther. . . . The blue of far-off ranges melted into deepest indigo, into black, into invisibility; only the nearer bluffs were any longer distinct. The night became palpable, it crept toward her.

In the last glimmering light she saw a human figure—a man extraordinarily tall. He stood silhouetted on a table bluff, and beside him were a dog and a covered wagon. She thought of waving, but before she did so the wagon dipped, and, with man and dog, vanished beyond the bluff.

§

And now night came. Swiftly the dusk swept veil upon veil over the buttes, blotting out the last flash of their jewel colours, shrouding them in a gray that soon sank to black. Birds and beasts crept off to rest. Nothing was seen, nothing heard; only the throb of the earth, lying naked in the dark, as she gathered to her breast her myriad offspring, might be felt like the pulse of a sheltering mother.

VI

§

AT THE end of that day, when Effie saw Victor Trench with his canvas-covered wagon, he was approaching home. After a month off with his sheep, he was coming back for fear, if he stayed any longer, he would bleat.

He had travelled many miles in the mountains, seeking fresh grass and water for the sheep. Once he had visited a ranch where he could lay in supplies; nobody was at home, he had taken the supplies, left money, and departed. The only human being to whom he had spoken for four weeks was a squaw who had sold him for a dollar a cupful of choke cherries from the beautiful and dirty basket in which she had been gathering them, and had stolen a carving-knife, a blue neckerchief, and a flask of whisky from his wagon.

Slowly, trudging like the sheep, he had travelled back over the miles. Cold mountain days, growing milder as he descended. . . . Valleys, streams that winked. . . . The plain, sagebrush of distant violet, of near-by gray. . . . The buttes, rudely sculptured by winds, Druid temples, ancient, monolithic. . . .

Glancing from a bluff at twilight, he discerned Effie's distant figure and grunted his disgust.

"A woman! What's she doing here, like to know? Business has she got out this way?" Even the Bad Lands were not large enough for him and a woman to inhabit together. He turned on his heel, flinging away from sight of the detested sex.

"Come along, dog." The sheep were far beyond; he walked beside the wagon and his despairing thoughts walked with him.

They were coming to be a stubborn throng, these thoughts. They reminded him of the sheep—they crowded so, nudging, pushing, jostling, flocking—dozens of them, scores—and they wouldn't go anywhere that he tried to drive them. It was as if he ran around in front and tried to head off the flock of thoughts from his money losses, but they pushed past him, rushed headlong into that abyss. . . . Then the matter of his job that somebody else had filled while he was in France—the flock of thoughts plunged into that, next. And his college career broken off. . . . Everywhere the flocking thoughts rushed, beyond his control.

Suns had risen and set above the solitude, the moon had waned and returned, and the swaying band of sheep had been his world. Gradually, under these conditions, they took on human characteristics. A Pennsylvania community they became, like one in which he had worked, a small-town circle, gabbling, credulous, crafty at ferreting out personal items, avid for savoury

bits of gossip which they rolled upon their tongues. They were like women who pry out the fact that another woman's kitchen is unswept although her parlour is "redd up" for display; like men who wag over the discovery that another man has secretly mortgaged his house to meet difficulties.

There was one old ram that looked exactly like Vic's colonel whom he had hated. It had wide brutal nostrils and a salacious mouth and small eyes that fell back in its head and regarded you unwinkingly like the eyes of a torturer measuring his victim. When he looked long at this ram it seemed fairly to take on human form, so like the Colonel was it; he could see it strut in olive-drab. . . . The insignia. . . . The grunted commands. Once he had struck the ram. . . .

The words of that old-timer, Ulysses Pinker, came back to Vic. "Yessir, there never was a herder that wa'n't a leetle bit off if not more so. Bein' out with the sheep month after month seems to git 'em queer. It's that noise the band makes—like singin' school—'Do! La! Re! Fa! Si! Do! Mi! Do!' An' the way they keep lookin' at you—squinty, kinda—sly. A man may enjoy bein' off alone in this country—pleasant change, some of 'em says, if they're priv'leged to endoor the holy bonds o' matrimony while at home—but if he's with the sheep, his idees begin to burrow into him same's gophers burrow into a garden patch, an' pretty soon he's all riddled with burrowin's an' he caves in."

Often Vic recalled the words. Would he "cave in"?

he wondered. And what if he did—who cared? Sometimes he would come upon the "sheep herders' monuments" familiar to the northwestern ranges—mounds of stones, built, to no purpose, by herders over many years—a record of their battle against the solitude. Back and forth, back and forth they had trudged, carrying, piling—feigning preoccupation—bluffing to the solitude: "I'm busy, you can't catch *me !*"

At first Vic had piled stones himself, until the solitude called his bluff. Then he had given up. Hour after hour he had sat upon the cairn, arms dangling over knees, body and head drooping forward. At last, with a tremendous tug, he had roused himself and started for the ranch.

§

After passing from Effie's sight, he found himself nearing that lone dot on the surface of infinity which, for want of a more accurate name, he called "home." His feet dragged, his tall body drooped with heaviness.

"Well, Blighty—here we are."

The dog had been watching him anxiously, as though he sensed in his master some more than common bitterness or rashness of mood. Now, upon hearing him speak, he gave vent to barks.

"Oh, 'This is the life, this is the life, this is the li-yi-yife,' is it, you fool cur!" Vic retorted angrily, mimicking through clinched teeth the mongrel's optimistic yaps. "It may be the life for you, but a man can't

run around sticking his nose into every prairie-dog hole in hopes that a rattler will stick his nose out, and he can't get any kick out of running after a rabbit just to see a wad of white cotton disappearing like the observation car of an Overland Limited."

He was at his door. In the dusk, the small log dwelling looked no more than a dark wart upon the surface of the bare earth. A few smaller warts beyond were the outhouses. He hesitated; then entered.

A nausea of body and spirit seized him, and he shut his eyes for the moment. The house had been tightly closed for a month, and now its smell swayed forward to meet him: the smell of earth, which all such dwellings—either built of sod or daubed with mud—have in common with the grave. He opened his eyes. The light was almost gone, but he took in the familiar picture—scant, rude furnishings—bare floor—an untidy array of cooking utensils, clothing and tools scattered as he had left them. A box on end served for washstand beside the cook stove; in the once nickel-plated and now rusty holder nailed above it lay a bar of brown kitchen soap, a dishevelled toothbrush, and a short-toothed rubber comb minus several teeth. A crumpled roller towel hung near. The curtains of thick muslin were strung on wires, and had been bunched up over their wires to admit more light—and left so. The stamp of desolate bachelorhood was everywhere. Shoes lay where they had been thrown upon the floor, a pair of overalls upon the table—along with a monkey-

wrench, a caponizing instrument, and a package of poison for rats. The only ornaments in this room were a crude but living sketch of an old French peasant woman embracing a much-embarrassed American soldier, and a picture of General Pershing cut from a newspaper's rotogravure.

With an effort, Vic pulled himself together and lighted the lamp. He flung off his hat. Vaguely he knew that he was famished—supplies had given out in the wagon. He went to the cupboard—nothing there but a small tin of beef. After a rummage he found the can opener on the bureau in the bedroom and opened the tin.

The dog had followed him in, and now sat with head up, eyes glued to the inch-worm progress of the can-opener, while his twig of a tail scraped the floor in anticipatory wags.

Vic turned, saw him. The dog was in need of food, he knew. Although Blighty chased every rabbit, gopher, curlew, and prairie dog, pursuing with the fury and outcry of a whole pack of wolves, he always returned empty-mouthed, snuffing, and dejected. Although a sheep dog and a waif, he was as incompetent at self-provision as the pampered Pekinese of a lady's boudoir. Vic said "Damn," angry at himself because he emptied the tin upon the bare ground outside the door where Blighty, with a grateful yap, fell upon it.

Again Trench turned back into the house, and again

that smell of earth waved over him, clammy, nauseating. A small pile of mail on the table caught his eye. Some neighbour—(a term which applies over a range of fifty or a hundred miles in this vast land) had no doubt chanced to be driving out that way and had brought it along. He ran over it dully, casting aside a communication from the Veterans' Bureau; a letter from another ex-service man to say he was quitting this hell of a place, moving on to Calgary; a patent medicine advertisement which promised to cure, from one and the same bottle, every ail that flesh is heir to from a headache to a bunion. There was an announcement of a country dance in an abandoned schoolhouse—not for him! This, that, the other. . . . He read on. . . . All at once a start prickled along his spine, his muscles tightened with suddenly riveted attention.

"Sorry to have to tell you that the Stickney Non-Oscillating has gone up. Stock no good."

It was the one investment that Vic had left outside the ranch—a small one, but a hope. The news struck him at a crucial moment—the moment when discouragement and loneliness were at their peak. He was tired out from his long journey, smitten afresh by the gloom of his dwelling, and he had just seen his dog gulp the last morsel of the tinned beef.

All at once despair leaped like fire. Seized by its intoxication, he flamed high, exhilarated. A new

energy flooded him. He glittered: hard, bright, cold, like metal.

"That settles it!"

§

With a stride he was at the table, he snatched the drawer handle, rattled, shook, jerked the stubborn drawer open. He reached far back into its depths——

"No! Not *yet*——"

Another impulse had interrupted the first. There was still a little cash. He jingled the coins in his pocket, opened a bill fold and rippled some greenbacks under his thumb. "The last left of all I brought from the East. They'll break 'em into cartwheels quick enough!"

He thrust the money back into his pockets. "I'll blow it first—to the last cent! There's enough left to make a night of it, and then——!"

The idea struck to his desolate mind as liquor to an empty stomach. He was inflamed. He put the derringer into a pocket, smashed on his hat, blew out the lamp from force of habit, and flung out to the log shed which served as garage. Ten minutes later, the car was pounding its way over the ruts that led to town.

Blighty's last wistful inquiry faded out behind him.

VII

§

VIC rode his car as a drunken man rides a horse. He seemed fairly to lash it, to yank the bit, to pierce it with spurs. When, from time to time, he had to dismount and render it aid, he would leap again as if to a saddle, curse it for the delay, forge ahead over the high centre that sought to halt him—down a cut-bank steep as a wall—splashing, lurching through the river bed—up another wall, pounding at the perpendicular until the groaning machine made its way to the top, where it reeled, battling for foothold with the river chortling below. Out upon the rutty road again, lurching forward, thrashing madly ahead. A fluttering, a scuttling—his light flashing upon white wing, white tail in terrified flight. . . .

The faster he drove, the higher rose his intoxication of despairing purpose. At last vacillation was over. . . . There was to be no gesture with this exit, no self-dramatization, no standing off and gazing at himself with admiring pity. It was to be businesslike; the night of revel was not intended as a grandiose flourish, but merely a means of bolstering up his resolve. Sitting alone in his cabin, thinking it over, he might have

vacillated again. But this way was like a run before the jump; this way, he would see the thing through.

The plan made itself explicit as he drove. It was simple enough. He would make a night of it, then take a hotel room and "settle things." He would leave a letter for old Ulysses Pinker, asking him to take charge of the few details—sell the cow, horse, and fowls for debt, take the outfit himself. And he would ask him to take Blighty. Vic slammed his thoughts quickly, like a door, upon Blighty.

"The hell! If that high centre tries to stop me again, I'll jump it!"

Crunching, crashing, tilting, on again. Nothing should stop him. He would plunge straight forward to the end. Like making a high dive, when you know you're going to strike bottom—but the moment of the dive, of your naked coruscating body's flash through space, is yours. . . . Another cut-bank—gosh, hear the Lizzie groan! She wasn't taking her thrashing well to-night, the brute—get along, there! Up the farther bank—on, thump, pound. . . . Lights.

There was noise along with the lights—music. Vic scowled into the dark, trying to make out the place—oh, yes, he knew—the schoolhouse—the dance. He recalled the announcement in his mail. Such entertainments were occasionally held in the old Cottonwood School, an isolated building now abandoned for the consolidated school of modern device. Many of these discarded buildings had been loaded upon trucks and

trundled into near-by towns to serve as public halls; but the Cottonwood had been found a convenient headquarters for gatherings of scattered plainspeople and townspeople, and was left where it had been built years before.

The moon was beginning to bulge above the horizon like a boy's red cheeks blown out. In its light, the small square building stood out clearly; behind it, the two outhouses, oblong boxes on end. There were no bluffs in this district. Except for the little school and its little twin privies, nothing broke the huge blank plain. The door of the school was open, its windows uncurtained, and from them light poured, gathering in a pool on the bare ground. Just beyond the light Vic made out a group of motor cars lurking in the shadow.

The road led directly past the schoolhouse, and although his intention was to avoid the throng, he found himself hailed by familiar voices: "That you, Trench?" —"Some drivin' you're doin'!"

He halted, gave back hail for hail with a geniality that was grimmer than his native moroseness. "Hello, there, Bill! Hello, Beady! Hi, Mikey! Thought I'd find you all in town. Got a few dollars to throw away —come along!"

"*I'll* say we'll help you!" Beady assured him. He was a thin, reddish-haired youth with eyes like a coyote's. "No use goin' to town. We got a little game on in Mikey's car."

"Yeh, you stick around here," Bill added. "The

farmers from Pleasant Coulee don't wanta be haulin' back the white mule they brung over. Got the biggest kick yet. Here, try the stuff."

Pleasant Coulee was a settlement which gloried in the fame that it possessed "a still on every farm." Its products were known to the wise throughout the country, over which they were transported in loads of alfalfa, in sacks of wheat, in the bottom of a wagon filled with live and bleating lambs, in a steam thrasher, once in a hearse.

Vic took the glass, and a sandwich. "Plenty o' grub," they assured him. The food and liquor warmed his body but not his spirit.

§

From the schoolhouse came the din of girls' shrilling laughter, of men's shouts. A fox trot strummed its way forth into the solitude of the surrounding plain and disintegrated into atoms of sound; these blew away to silence. Here in shadowy circle the cars were drawn up; just beyond, two ancient vehicles with horses stood at a meekly respectful distance. Silence fell upon Mikey's car; a tense group was clustered within it, others strained to peer in. Under the flare of a lamp, heads were bent above the pie board which served as table.

"Say, three of a kind!"

From time to time a sharp exclamation would break,

then silence again. . . . The snap of shuffling, the slush of dealing. Heads bumping. Red spots, black spots jumping forth in the flare. . . . A jug lifted out from under the seat. The gurgle and hiccup of pouring. . . .

"By J——! A flush!"

Vic, feverish, keen, sat tensest of all. As though it mattered. When he knew that it did not matter. A dollar gone—two—five. . . . Yes, he was getting rid of it. After all, that was what he had set out to do.

"Say, I'm broke." He jumped to the ground, stretched his long cramped body, his prickling legs. "I'm going to Minoleum."

The others were sleekly pocketing his little all. "Let's shake a leg first," Bill proposed.

They drove their hands into their pockets under pushed-up red and green sweaters, and stood grinning lustfully in at the open door. Girls sensually fat, girls sensually thin, circled past, their cheeks against their partners', bodies close locked.

"Say, gimme a chicken can shimmy to beat the band!" Beady cried, greedy as a coyote.

"That un for me!"—"No, I want the fatty!" cried the others.

Vic snorted in a rage of disgust.

"No women in mine!" He flung away.

The music stopped, there was a rush. He heard the dancers going toward the cars where they stood parked in shadow. "This way—here!" the men urged the

girls, and there was again the gurgle of liquor poured from jugs.

He detested women, and he detested poor liquor. He had drunk but little of the white mule, and its effects had passed, but he wanted no more. There was nothing to tarry for. And, now that he thought it over, there was nothing to go on for, either. Why continue to Minoleum? He had played the game he had set out to play; his money was gone; why not settle things at once?

§

The young men had forgotten him; they had climbed into automobiles with the girls and the dark, and their talk was unheard. Once the silence was broken when a girl's slipper flew into the air, passing in swift distinctness across the path of light. There was a shriek, laughter, a scramble for it. . . . Women, everlastingly women.

He strode farther away. A few steps, and he was beyond the circle, beyond the pool of light. He was detached once more—alone on the plain—cut off from life, laughter, gaiety, sex desire. Around him blew the salty smell of the sage, like an ocean wind; above him were the stars, spilled heedlessly as though some giant conductor's punch had passed along the sky.

Vic's hand slid into his pocket. It met the cold sleek touch that awaited him.

VIII

§

WITH the coming of dark, Effie's struggles had grown desperate. Still she pressed on, urged by the hope that she might find a house; but her strength was almost gone. Over and over she stumbled and tripped from sheer fatigue; she would fall in rooty clumps of growth, or in ruts of earth; again she would force herself to her feet and stagger on blindly.

Once she had been carried over several miles by a woman astride a bony nag. The woman could neither speak nor understand English; she had picked Effie up and galloped off with her, jabbering in a foreign tongue, then all at once had set her down where two dim roads met, and had ridden on her way.

Effie had hoped that she was being taken to a farmhouse, and she sank where she found herself, crushed with disappointment. Pain, fasting, and exhaustion were combining to bring about collapse. Now, at last, she could go no farther; she could only lie where she was, forever. . . .

A glimmer reached her. Yes, it was real. It was a light.

She staggered to her feet, accomplishing the im-

possible. Every step was a stab, but she went forward. . . . More light. A burst of it: bright, rude light; voices, music, the confusion of merrymaking. She saw the schoolhouse, heard the shrilling dancers.

She understood. The woman had supposed her to be going to this party, and so had put her down at the nearest point on her own way. Effie pressed forward, panting hard with the effort. Not far from the building she paused, watching the couples pass and re-pass the lighted doorway. . . . Shouts, squeals, boisterous voices picking up the refrain and booming it forth—

"Oh, trot with the crowd and trot with the gang,
Up on the wagon, trot to beat the band."

Life, the human pulse. . . . Suddenly, the terrifying black desolation fell away, forgotten. She swam toward the dance as a fish swims into its own current. Pain and weariness melted like fog; she became newly alive. Her feet forgot themselves; tortured as they were, puffing between the intricate straps of the once-splendid green shoes, they all at once went light as a nymph's, they tripped forward. Their nimbleness, their gaiety were the very intoxication of fatigue; nothing could stay them.

At the open door she halted. Her eyes sparkled, her cheeks were flushed, her feet tapped, her whole body pulsed with the rhythm. Would a partner come and find her? She couldn't wait, she wanted to fling herself upon the music and let it carry her away. . . .

A sound caused her to turn. There, almost beside her, in the shadow of the building, stood a young man, strangely tall—so tall that she was sure he must be the one she had seen that evening. His brooding dark eyebrows scowled down at a pad and pencil that he held; he was leaning toward the light to write.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, startled by the suddenness of this sombre ghost. "Oh!" was all she had said, she felt sure; and yet his glare was quite terrific. He turned again to his writing.

"Don't! Don't write!" she exclaimed, and her arms went out.

Effie was surprised at her arms. She was by temperament the sought, never the seeker; but she was unaware of this man as either an individual or a sex; all she knew was that pulsing rhythm which called to the throb of her own veins—she wanted the dance. "Say, it's terrible to lose a minute of it!" she heard herself saying. "Come—oh, come on!"

And still she saw her arms reaching forth.

§

At the moment when, alone with the indifferent stars, Vic's hand reached into his pocket, he remembered the letter of instructions to Uly Pinker, and he stepped to the light to scribble it. While writing, he suddenly became aware of a young woman, unknown, tattered and dishevelled, but oddly pretty. Maybe the wanderer he had seen a few hours back. He wished she'd go—she

might speak to him if she stayed. He scowled and wrote faster. Yes—she was going to speak. "Don't write!" she said. "Come on!" She was asking him to dance! She was holding out her arms, daring to invite him!

He flung up his head with a snarl. She better be frightened. Yes—she was. Showed it. But she didn't go. Kept on staying. Right where she was. And her arms stayed where they were, too. As if they couldn't help it. Her face looked more and more frightened, as if it wanted to run because he snarled; but the arms wouldn't let it.

"*I*'m not going to dance!" he cried angrily to the arms. And still they waited, reaching out, ready, although the girl's face faded and wasn't pretty any more, it was so afraid of him. It was as if she longed to flee, but some spell was laid upon her, constraining her to lure him.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow!" he cried, more angrily. "I'm not *going* to dance, I tell you!"

And still she stood there, waiting. He saw her small breasts quiver; they were pointed under the clinging green sweater. He saw her green toe tapping in time. In the light her wrists showed a filmy pale down; it looked as if it would be soft to touch like that of the hepatica in spring. Her arms were thin in the tight sweater sleeves. They waited. He was about to fling away in wrath——

Suddenly the pent-up fury at life that had prompted

him to set off on a night of final orgy swept back upon him. It blew him high once more; on its impulse he snatched the girl.

"All right, then, if you've got to!"

She was small; no more than a twig in the gale of his darkly mad mood. He whirled her into the room, they caught the measure, flung themselves upon it. He had never in his life danced except a few times in the halls he had taken to visiting after his way broke up. But now his recklessness lent a certain savage skill; Effie felt the fascination of being swept away by some strangely rhythmical tornado. She gave way, circling dizzily, while the refrain sang in her ears:

"Oh, trot with the crowd and trot with the gang . . ."

Far out, circling, under the kerosene lamps. Queer lamps, swimming, bobbing like bottle imps. . . . She was floating on a tide. . . . She was trying to remember where she was. . . . A fat lamp, hopping about. . . . The tide was surging over her head instead of bearing her along. Everything turned yellow—dingy, oily yellow—then black.

§

The girl was lying unconscious, limp as a rag of ribbon in Vic's arms. The music clashed, stopped. People came rushing. People always did fool things like that.

"Clear away—give her some air!" he ordered them.

Shaking off the fetid breath of the room—a mingling of kerosene smoke, cheap perfumes, hair tonics, and unpleasant personal odours—he lifted Effie's slight weight and carried her out of doors, where he laid her across the rear seat of his car as easily as if she had been a child. He drove back those who followed and thought to screen their gluttonous curiosity under offers of help; alone, he fell to work.

Making sure that her head was low, he set about chafing her hands and pressing a flask to her lips. War had taught him such things. But the minutes went on, and she lay unconscious.

"Damn nuisance. What did she have to go and do this for?" he said. But he kept on chafing her hands. He cast vague glances back toward the schoolhouse. Did the doctor happen to be inside? he wondered. Ought he to call aid?

"Like a woman to do such a thing. Fool I was, to dance with her."

But, queerly, he didn't want to call aid. A curious sense of possession had seized upon him as he carried the helpless small body to his car.

§

Meanwhile, the crowd within doors was in a foam of curiosity. Something new and mystifying had happened in a monotonous world.

"Who the heck is she, anyway? Where'd she come from?"

"Not Minoleum. Never was a girl as pretty as that in Minoleum."

"My land, call her pretty? If she is, then so's Mrs. Sam Sims." Mrs. Sam Sims was a native of the county who had had greatness thrust upon her when a passing circus had borne her off to appear in its side show as Angelina Du Pont, the World's Homeliest Woman.

Debate waxed. Degrees of admiration varied from summer heat to freezing. Effie's beauty was too individual, too irregular, too much a matter of the flame within to reach the majority. Curiosity grew heated. "How'd she git here, anyway?"—"We ain't runnin' no beauty contest!"—"Say, but she kin dance! She's got more pep'n a bronch! I'd like to know what her brand is!" Disapproval, malice, concupiscence. . . . Beady's coyote eyes, gleaming, stirring, ravening, biding. . . .

A tall old plainsman slipped up to a mannish old woman who was spreading supper.

"Say, Em, come out here," he whispered, and, when they were outside in the dark:

"I know all about that girl. I was at the station when she come in from the East. That gosh-darned Maudie Blum tol' her Owensly Junction was a fine city where she could make a livin' singin'——"

"Good Lord! The poor little calf!" burst in Em Billopp, her heart opening like a bivalve in water. "Why, Uly Pinker——"

Uly put a finger to his lips. "Shh! There's them

as'll think the girl's bad. But you take a look in that little face an' you'll know she's as innycent as them two baby angels leanin' over the bar in the cherub pickcher."

Em Billopp made no pause. "Good or bad, what's that got to do with it?" she demanded. "What she needs is some hot coffee an' a sandwich."

§

While Em and Uly were conferring, Effie had at length opened her eyes. It was dark in the car; only a sneaking ray of moonlight found its way past the screening top. It was by this ray that Vic saw her eyes flutter open. Something caught his breath as he saw.

For a few moments she was vague; then she remembered.

"Oh! We—was dancing. It was grand. What happened? Did I faint?"

He snorted. "Sure. A woman always does a fool thing like that."

She looked frightened. "I—couldn't help it." But swift upon fear followed a twinkle. She sat up, shook herself together.

"Say, boy, for the love o' Pete, get me something! I been lost and walking all over North America, an' I never had a thing but two bites o' chawklut all day. I'll take squab if you got it." She slanted at him a droll glance. "An' I wouldn't mind allygator pear salad an' finish up with Spumoni an' assorted cakes. But if you don't find 'em convenient, a hot dog'll do."

Something in his throat felt hoarse and queer. "I'll see that you're fed," was all he said aloud, and he started toward the school—to meet two tiptoeing figures on the way.

"Where you got that girl?" demanded Em Billopp, maternally fierce, balancing a pungent cup. "You leave her to me—a man don't know nothin'."

Uly Pinker, stealing behind with a heaped plate, delivered up his load in the car. The men stepped aside. "You poor little colt! You starvin' duck! Ain't you the hungry calf, though!" they could hear Em croon. Perhaps at that moment old Em Billopp, in her maternal hunger, was a more pathetic figure than Effie Galpin in her bodily starvation. Mother to nobody, Em was mother to all the county. Many a time she had ridden miles through the worst of weather to care for the sick or dying or to assist at a birth. She had taken in the destitute, fed and clothed them. She could hew timber, grub sage, plough a field, herd cattle like a man; she could curse like a ruffian; and she could cherish the weak like a woman.

"There, there! I'll wrap you up in my shawl. Poor rabbit! Eat grajool, now, an' it'll set first rate on your stummick," Vic heard.

There was a gay little chuckle. "Say, you better pitchfork it to me through the bars. It's so long past feeding time, I might be dang'rous."

Vic grunted again. And again rose that queer feeling in his throat.

IX

§

THE moon had crawled under a cloud, and it was dark in Vic Trench's car. He and Effie sat there alone. Uly and Em had gone back to the schoolhouse, the young people were once more absorbed in the dance. He heard the music crashing on, but it seemed a long way off. . . . Clumsily he fumbled, pulling the robe over Effie's lap; he peered at her. . . . A woman—no use for 'em. . . . Her face was an indistinct whiteness there in the dark, yet it somehow suggested beauty and delicacy—like a yucca bloom that you come upon in the desert night, half seen but alluring. He did not know that he thought this thought. He would have been enraged at himself had he known.

"Look here. Is this true—what Uly Pinker's been telling me about you?" he all at once demanded.

"How d' I know what he's been telling you an' you been listening to? I never did take much stock in men's talk," she retorted with a flick of the old defensive whip. She flicked it through force of habit—the habit of a woman alone and fending for herself, resenting male intrusion. She wasn't going to have men talking her over.

Vic shrugged. "He says that woman promoter lied to you, and you came West thinking Owensly Junction was a big place where you could get a job singing."

"That's right."

He paused. Her defensiveness faded. Here was no sign of intrusion, she realized—here, above all, was no molasses seeker.

"Gosh," he said at length. "You must be sore."

She smiled a twisted little smile, that of one who has found out a good deal about life. "Well—I s'pose something'll turn up. 'Course I'm not living in luxury right now. I did have supper, thanks to you folks, but I haven't got a date for breakfast, and the only room that's been offered to me was one o' them puppy-dog holes in the ground—I run my foot into it and pretty near had to engage it for the season. . . . When I was a kid I fell in the pickle barrel out back the grocery, an' somebody fished me out by one pigtail. Maybe I'll get fished out now, somehow."

He sat frowning and silent. At length he asked:

"Don't you know what you're going to do? Haven't you got anybody to go back to?" Then, with a queer irrelevancy, he added, "My name's Victor Trench."

She appeared to be turning it over. "Vic, d' they call you?"

"Yeh."

"I like that name. I knew a black'n tan dog named Vic. Mine's Effie—Effie Galpin."

He made no comment aloud. A fool name, he said to himself.

After another pause he asked, "Anything I can do?" The offer came in spite of him.

"You might give me the address o' the best hotel." She was nothing short of jaunty.

He muttered something between his teeth, and the rest of it stuck in his throat. "Might drive you somewhere," he suggested. "I'm in a hurry, but I could drop you on the way." His own words reminded him that he wanted to be off, and he drummed impatiently on the leather seat.

"I d' know where you'd drop me. I guess I'm dropped enough already." He caught her quizzical smile in a passing light. "No, I haven't got anybody to go to," she went on, reverting to his earlier question. "That is, nobody I want to go to. Mrs. Whelpley isn't my real sister."

He waited, listening for more. "Go ahead," he said. Why he said it he couldn't guess. It was absurd that he should feel any interest. There wasn't time left to be interested in anything. And yet, in spite of himself, he said, "Go ahead." She looked up at him, as if doubtful, and asked:

"D'you sure want to know about me?"

"Uh-huh."

She told him. How she wasn't anybody at all—anybody that *belonged*. About all the years of growing up—school and work. The Whelpley family. Babies.

Being a song demonstrator. Dishpans. "Rose of the Plains." The journey West. Everything.

She drew a long breath as she ended. She leaned back, tired, and stretched out her arms from under Em's shawl with a yawn. Vic had lent her his sweater, and its long sleeves covered her hands and dangled like flappers from the fingers.

"Some fit!" she said, and made a droll gesture. "One o' them birds in the Shackleton pickchers—what's their name?"

"Hh!" he snorted. He wouldn't tell her that she meant a penguin. He wouldn't chat. He was suddenly filled with hot anger at her. Anger that she had endured such bitter hardships, that she was so pathetically destitute, that she so heightened the pathos of her situation by the gay satire under which she first veiled it, the humorous valour with which she then tore aside the veil. He hated her for being so wrenchingly pitiful, so droll, so brave.

"Well—want me to drive you anywhere—to Minoleum—to the train? It's getting late," he said harshly, and looked at his watch.

"Train? Not 'less I can bum my way on the baggage car. But Min-Minoleum? What's that like? Could I get a job there?"

"Little smart-aleck town. Not much chance. Waitress, maybe. That's about all. But I can drive you there and leave you with the minister and his wife. They'll keep you overnight. I've got to be going."

She sat up briskly. "Oh—don't let me be keeping you if you've got a date."

"I have. Urgent, too." His mouth twisted bitterly.

"I'll be going." She threw off Em's shawl and tugged at the sweater's back, pulling it off over her head. "Thanks for this. I'm warm now."

She had a foot upon the step of the car where its door stood open, but now she turned back toward him, and he could see her face clearly in a chance ray of light. The rouge had been rubbed off and it was pale. Again he caught that freakish recollection of the yucca bloom he had once seen glimmering through the dark of the desert.

"Say, that was—a grand dance," she said wistfully. "Wisht I hadn't a had to go an' spoil it. There won't be another like that coming to me very soon, *I*'ll say!"

He set his teeth. "What *will* be coming to you?" he ground out against his volition.

"Gawd knows!"

He put a hand upon her arm brusquely and forced her back.

"Wait a minute. Don't go. I—I'll drive you somewhere. Wait till—till I come back."

§

He jumped from the car and walked hurriedly to a distance. The strangest impulse had seized him: he must get away, off there by himself, to think. But when he got there he couldn't think. Couldn't think

out anything. He could only feel. He could feel still the vibration of her husky-sweet voice. He could feel the soft helplessness into which she relaxed at times, then that sudden gallant laugh—a stiffening, a quip.

Rot. What was he doing, wasting time with a woman? Get away from them. Get out there. Stars and a moon and a blue-black sky and a black earth, and they were good to lie with. He stooped, felt the earth with his palm. . . . He hadn't known it was so cold. . . . He must bring her to a decision. If he had to drive her to Minoleum he wanted to get it over, then be free. He walked back quickly to the car.

"Well?" he demanded, but she did not answer. She was deep in a corner, heaped.

He stepped in and bent, peering to make out whether her eyes were open. She made no sign. He bent closer. Her breath brushed his face. She was asleep.

"Want me to drive you to town, or don't you?" had been on the tip of his tongue. But he did not say it.

At that moment he caught the smell of her. She smelt of life.

All at once he was seized by the universal human impulse to clutch at life as it slips. It was pure instinct, no more, but it swept away the resolve that had been slowly, firmly building for months. Out there—cold stars above a cold earth; here—warmth, a pulse, blood flowing, breath sighing, live organs functioning. That smell—of her breath, of her sweet body. It was like a straw to the drowning and he clutched. He had

no desire to do so, he resolutely chose to drown. But the instinctive forces tossed aside his choice like a chip. It was as involuntary as the act of muscles—as when an eyelid winces, a fist tightens. Life drifted near, and he snatched.

"Wake up!" he cried, giving her arm a shake. She opened her eyes, looked at him dreamily, but did not speak.

He took hold of both her shoulders, shook her harder, drew her forward so that they were staring close into each other's eyes.

"I'm a down-and-out ex-service man," he said. "As much a scrap of drift as you are. Broke. Got a little good-for-nothing ranch with a log shanty, and that's all. Everything I raise dies. To-night I came to the end—turned my back on the outfit—quit. But we're both in the same boat. Might be an idea to drown together. I'll go back if you say so. Say which. I'll drive you to Minoleum and leave you with somebody that'll look after you till you can get back East. Or—there's my ranch. Up to you. If you want to go fifty-fifty on starving to death, come along."

X

§

IF YOU want to go fifty-fifty on starving to death, come along."

Through a long silence they had stared at each other, like two runners who have crashed in collision and are too dazed by shock to speak, to separate. Two runners, indeed, each in mad flight from an intolerable reality—in each case a reality which the mature had created and thrust upon the young. He, a surviving victim of war; she, a victim of economic upheaval plus adult selfishness. He had been fleeing by the dark path, she by the falsely glittering. Then collision. Shock, sudden and complex reactions, and this thing had happened. Young blood stirred by the dance. . . . Perhaps the touch of superstition that lurks in every human mind contributed the final shove—like fate, Effie thought, that they should have seen each other in the wilderness that very evening. In her desperation she flipped the coin of life—who cared, anyhow, what did anything matter? She was just nobody, nobody at all, she didn't belong. . . . Should she? "Fifty-fifty." . . . Tails, heads. . . .

In silent, dazed moments she had realized that she

was tying the handkerchief over her own eyes and plunging. But—"Anything rather than go back." The unknown. . . . But it was her last mad escape from the known, from that hideous reality of the past. Teeth set, eyes shut tight. No looking ahead, no looking behind. Just a blind leap in the dark. One—two —*three!*

§

The man was waiting at his door. But she could not —abso*lute*ly could not, she told herself. She must run —fly—back into the wilderness.

"I—I can't——"

But he seemed not to hear. "Come on—sorry we're not in order. Blighty and I are bad housekeepers. I know it's no place to bring a woman."

For that instant his moroseness vanished. She caught a note of something like appeal, as though he were crestfallen at her reluctance, humble, troubled. She turned and faced him; raised her head. The smile she gave him then had the beauty of sheer valour.

"I—I'm sure it's very nice," she lied superbly, and entered.

§

He was lighting a lamp in the bleak bedroom.

"If there's anything I can do—to make you comfortable. . . ." Again she caught the troubled note. "Nothing here for a woman. Better than the bare ground, that's all. But you can sleep, and be safe."

He stood back for her to enter, and went, drawing shut the door behind him. He must attend to the car, he said. And he would bring in the food supplies that he had obtained at the schoolhouse.

She looked about at the bare unpainted floor, the mud-daubed walls of logs, the cheap golden-oak bureau and chairs, the roughly made but clean bed. The only ornaments were some small sketches from France—a Salvation Army lassie distributing doughnuts, winter dugouts. The bureau was littered with a strop, a pile of socks, a tobacco pouch, shaving soap, screw hooks. Her eyes took in the repellent ugliness; her nostrils were filled with the earthy odour of the house. "Pugh!" She screwed up her nose; it sickened her.

Automatically she began to unwrap herself from Em Billopp's vast shawl. The tin basin, the nicked pitcher half filled with cold hard water, and a piece of brown soap worn to a waistline offered scant comfort for bathing. "To-morrow I'll have tubs and tubs of hot water!" she consoled herself, not guessing that water in the dry country is as precious as liquid gold, or as champagne in a land of prohibition. Being without her suitcase, she but half undressed, then, forlornly, blew out the lamp and groped her way toward the bed.

The window beside it—a small square opening in the log wall with a hinged sash—was closed tight, imprisoning the dreadful earthy odour. She pulled it open, and instantly the tingling air seemed to fly to her brain, relieving her depression. She leaned there, bathing her

face in the thin coldness, filling her nostrils with the salty tang of the sagebrush. It was better than sweet; it was tonic, life-giving. The moon hung, pale as a rag of torn cloud. That dark mass was the sheep, soft and thick and warm. A cry came from them.

Effie felt her heart catch. A silhouette suddenly reared itself from the top of a distant butte, sharp as a black cardboard cut-out against the fading moon. Upsitting body, lean forelegs, raised muzzle pointing skyward; then a long-drawn wail which rose, swelled shrilly, until it struck chill to the very centre of her being. It was a familiar enough sound to all plains dwellers; but to a frightened stranger, the coyote's hymeneal serenade in her honour was no omen of bliss.

"My land!" she moaned. "It's a wi-uld wolf!" She shrank away from the window.

The outer door slammed and the man's steps moved about in the living room. He had returned from the garage. . . . The steps stopped for a while. Then she heard, "Go on out, dog." Barks. The steps again. "Go on, I tell you." The steps again . . . approaching her door. Again she was seized with that longing to break away, to flee into outer darkness. The wi-uld wolf was out there, but——

She stood, trembling. . . . Crumpling into a heap, she sank upon the bed and her face went down into her hands.

§

It was thus that Vic found her. He struck a match, saw the crouching figure, heard smothered sobs. She did not look up, but she knew that he blew out the match without lighting the lamp; that he was crossing to her in a stride; she felt him standing there, close, although he did not touch her.

"Poor kid." It came nearer to tenderness than any word he had yet uttered—or ever would, perhaps.

All at once her fear passed. She did not know why. But she nuzzled close to him as to a refuge. He did not hold her, did not kiss her—a strange, bound-in man. She was never to know him fully—perhaps never better than at that moment, when that flooding sense of safety in his presence overswept her. He was the haven to which she instinctively turned against her fears—of the wilderness, of its vastness and its mysteries, of its strange creatures. . . . Against fear of life and love. . . . Above all, fear of him.

"You're all in," he muttered. Then, with a contemptuous glance about: "Rotten place to bring a woman!"

At that she throttled her sobs. At once she was the comforter, she possessed the situation.

"There—don't you care! It's all right, boy!" She drew herself up firmly and patted his sleeve. "It's a lovely place, I know—I'm crazy to see it by daylight. An' I love lambs. Only that wolf scared me, I'm such a 'fraid-cat."

He gave a short laugh. "The coyotes won't hurt

you. You'll be out gunning for them as soon as you get the tenderfoot rubbed off."

She tried to laugh too at the fancy. But, falling asleep at length in a dawn through which she had seen the "wi-uld wolf" slouching off, with tail pendent, hang-dog of mien, guilty before the eye of day, she dreamed turbidly of a stark plain and a stark sky and between them only the wail of the evil prowler.

PART II

REFUGEES FROM REALITY: OVERTAKEN

I

§

IN THE full glare of the next morning Effie stared at the facts in stupefaction.

On Monday, she had packed her vi'let soap, still wet from the bath in Newark, New Jersey, and had fled not far short of two thousand miles to escape a reality so real that she had quailed helplessly before its terrors. On Friday, when that soap within her vanity case had hardly more than dried, she found herself confronted by a new reality so much more overwhelming than the old that she could not take it in. But she knew that it was here, to be faced. She knew that delusion was dead at last.

What she faced was more appalling, as she soon perceived, than she would be able to grasp all at once. She would "get it" by degrees. She began by taking a bird's-eye view from a small knoll beyond the outbuildings where she had gone to throw out the dishwater after the first connubial breakfast. Dishwater, to escape which she had travelled those almost two thousand miles.

She set the pan down and turned to survey her new home. How, she wondered, had she for a single mo-

ment seen it as a nestling refuge? That first tender impression, made through the veil of dusk and distance, was blotted out now, she felt, beyond any hope of recovery. The house was a drab wart upon the face of a drab earth. It was barren, desolate, hideous, revolting —an atom of ugliness in the midst of the forsaken bed of an ages-departed ocean. Vic had told her about the ocean this morning. It had made things even worse.

The logs of which the dwelling was built were cottonwood, smooth of surface and dully pale, the colour of parched earth. The only log cabins that Effie had ever seen before were natty little summer homes, dressed smartly in rich brown bark and snuggling in picturesque contrast against a woodsy green background. The bleakness of this dun monochrome was suffocating. By way of chimney a stovepipe thrust itself up through a roof which was only the door's height above the ground; small rudely cut squares supplied window space. Several outbuildings in a clump were miniatures of the house.

Not a spear of grass, not a vine or flowering plant was anywhere growing. By dint of painful irrigation, Vic had kept half alive a vegetable garden, but that was his utmost horticultural effort. The ground near the house differed from the surrounding plain in that it had been cleared of sagebrush and was worn smoothly hard. Its only adornments were the dog's broken dish, a few empty cans, and a discarded washtub. Chickens and turkeys strolled over it, leaving their droppings.

Dun in colour like the rest of the picture, the sheep grazed at a distance under the supervision of Blighty, who, having reverted to his original profession, after war's interruption, now brought to it an intense and ear-splitting enthusiasm. Not far from the flock was their winter shelter, half dugout, in the lee of a bluff; beside this, Effie could just make out the end of a covered wagon. She recognized it—the "gipsy wagon" of last evening's romantic mystery. Romantic mystery, forsooth! That had been back in her youth. In the preceding twilight. Ages ago. Fourteen hours dead in the past.

§

With supplies brought from the dance, Effie had contrived to purvey a breakfast that morning with few dishes and fewer utensils (the percolator had turned up afterward full of a sheep medicine); after which she had asked what she could do to be of use "round the ranch."

"You don't have to do anything," Vic had replied. "But if you want to take over the chickens, I'll see if there's any possibility of pulling together the vegetable garden."

He had driven off early to fetch the cow and fowls from a farm where they had been left in his absence; and now he was at work among the vegetables, in khaki and broad high hat. She could see the vivid red of his feather. Her eyes fixed thirstily upon that shifting spot of red. Already she felt the craving for colour

which always seizes dwellers in bleak vistas, which has been common to Arctic explorers and to Indians and cowboys of the plains, leading them to choose gorgeous blankets and bandanas.

Effie turned from the picture with a sharp intake of breath. Everything swept over her at once. It was as if, in that moment, her whole lifetime gathered itself up in one vast tidal wave and proceeded to drown her. She saw all the future as well as the past in that one wave. Here she was, with a man who owned a few sheep and a log hovel, and who couldn't make a living out of it for one, let alone for two. The figurative wolf was almost at his door, to say nothing of the actual wolf whose howls had been the nightmare of her bridal night. Life would be feeding chickens and washing dishes in scant water and breathing the odour of an earth-smelling house and hearing wild animals howl and gazing forth at a horrible world like the dream after you eat cheese and pastry. . . .

Her small even teeth set fiercely, like the parts of a biting machine. Then, picking up the dishpan, she strode down the knoll and flounced the water out upon the ground. The chickens came running; disappointed, they paused to lift one foot and gaze at Effie with a "Quaw-aw-aw-aw-awk?" of gossipy investigation.

"Nosey, every one of you!" she cried, thrusting out her chin at the fowls until it turned to a sharp white point. "Anybody might think you wanted to take the number o' my license plate, or see if I had my tail

light on! I never did like chickuns except fricasseed. You'll all wind up in the comp'ny o' dumplings if I have my way! You'll boil, you'll *sizzle* in the pot!"

Her outburst was not humorous, whatever it may have appeared. It was the cry of desperation. It had nothing to do with the fowls. It was the discharge of devastating emotions. They had reached a climax of horror, and they vented themselves in absurd vituperations. She shrieked them, insanely. Then, sobered and aged, she walked slowly back to the house.

II

§

THE first connubial breakfast. Coffee boiled for want of the percolator; eggs delectably fresh, offset by toast burned bitter because the stove was out of commission—all bolted in next-to-silence—it was over. Victor Trench had seen the woman go forth with the dishpan to stand on a knoll and survey her reality in the full glare of a brutally unclouded day. By the same glare he was facing his. For each the escaping flight had ceased. It was right about face, and halt. Facts. Look at them. Stare at them. They were staring back. No veiling of them. No dodging. No ducking. Here they were at last. Naked. Facts.

While Effie walked forth to that knoll beyond the outbuildings and gazed at her new home, Vic stood upon a mental knoll and surveyed his own outlook. He was stooping over cabbages and squashes, hoeing around corn, but he saw the vegetables through a haze. What he actually did see, stripped, vivid, dismaying as sudden nudity, was the appalling and immediate future.

He had reached the end long ago—had proved that he alone would starve to death on this ranch. And

then, as if not satisfied with demonstrating that, he had seized upon a woman and dragged her in to starve with him. He turned to the scarecrow above his tiny corn-patch—crazy zany, waving frenzied arms in the wind, its every gesture a shriek—and it seemed to him to be uttering the final comment on the night's adventure. "Madman's doing!" he heard it cry.

"You said it!" he told the scarecrow, whose name was Lorenzo. He walked up to Lorenzo, thrust his pipe at a rakish angle, tilted back his dicer. "Crazy world, and I'm the craziest fool in it. Set out for Minoleum last evening—knew what I was about. Didn't take more than an hour or so for bats to nest in my belfry."

The riotous, sun-drunk wind of the plains picked up the scarecrow's sleeve as if putting thumb to nose. Vic laughed sardonically.

"You needn't rub it in. I don't need telling twice. You should worry."

He snapped a finger nail against Lorenzo's pipe, knocking it to a still more rakish tilt. "Smoke up. Sorry I haven't got time to join you. No more stags for us. Got to get on the job. You've got a couple's crop to defend now, instead of a lone man's. Take it seriously, Lorenzo. God knows I do."

He walked among the melons and found them in bad shape, although not quite gone. Tomato plants, bean vines, and lettuces were crumpled like rags. He might get a few squashes and cabbages, and the corn was feebly alive. But the garden as a whole was brown and

disarrayed, as if long untended. So far gone was it that the day before he would have summed it up as dead and let it go at that. To-day, however, the situation forced him to look for any potential dinners.

"When the left-overs from the dance are gone, got to fall back on eggs and milk," he reflected. "Can piece out with roasting ears or a squash—only a few days, though. Well—to-morrow I'll see what kind of a loan I can raise in Minoleum. Probably get a turn-down. Dead-broke farmer's an old story now to the banks. Thousands of abandoned farms through the dry states, and the settlers that haven't deserted wondering how soon they'll follow or starve—something's got to burst."

§

He went on digging, hoeing, weeding, trimming, but with every hour of weary toil the prospect looked darker. What was the use, anyway? Pulling through a handful of vegetables that wanted to be let alone to die—and why not let 'em? A few meals more, before starvation set in for good and sure. Staving off the end by a week or so of dinners. Dragging out the cat's fun with the mouse—*mice* now. Two of 'em. No hole to hide in. Out in the open. Clinging together, waiting for the cat's final jaw-snap. Gosh!

He rose from stooping; wadded his handkerchief into a big ball, mopped the back of his neck and his forehead where the hat had left a wet red line. He plucked loose

his shirt sleeves at the inside crook of the elbow—left, right—giving each in turn a shake free from the damp arm. Drops running down his backbone. Sweat. The sweat in which man eats bread—and feeds it to woman. But what for?

It was noon, time to quit. He laid down his tools and walked slowly toward the house.

Blighty left the sheep which he had been tending and came running toward his master. Seating himself on a pile of brush roots, Vic fondled the animal, who stood upright between his knees, rumbling and biting in affection.

"Well, old boy," Vic cupped the shaggy head in his palm, roughed it about. "Here we are again."

A nosing. Snuffles.

"But not the same. Never the same again. Not by ourselves. All different."

Slobbers. Whimpers.

There was a long silence. Vic sat moodily staring at the mongrel. The scarecrow and the dog—his habitual confidants. For months of despairing loneliness, he had known no other intimates. Habit, like an old tooth, is not pulled without forceps. He jerked the mongrel's scraggly ears, drew a line with a hard forefinger down the bristly head and nose. . . . "Blighty—you old mutt. . . ." At length:

"What the hell did I do it for, anyhow? Huh? D'you know, dog?"

And with that he rose heavily and went in to dinner.

III

§

EFFIE saw little of Vic during the day. The noon dinner was hurried. He said that he must get back to his work in the garden which had gone to wreck while he was out with the sheep.

"Rabbits been playing the deuce with the cantaloupes—munch a hole in one, enough to spoil it for us, then go on to the next. Might forgive 'em if they'd finish one—but in *this* country, it's fatal to waste anything—even a drop of water. Especially a drop of water," he added, with a significant glance toward the pail.

She had already discovered that the dishes must be washed without change except for the final rinsing. If dishwashing had been detestable in Newark, with abundant fresh warm suds, what was it here with the water growing more tepid, more gray moment by moment as she advanced from tumblers to frying pan? Later on, when she once met Ruth Devney, the Red Cross social worker, she commented on this.

"That's nothing," Ruth assured her. "Plenty of dry-landers wash all the babies in one tubful of water

and count themselves lucky to have that one. A visiting nurse who came out here from the East complained that it wasn't sanitary for a whole family to bathe in the same water. Maybe; but also maybe it's more sanitary than not to bathe at all."

Vic was thinking aloud about the garden. "Made arrangements with Peary, another ex-service man, to give a look at the vegetables now and then while I was away, but he doesn't seem to have been here, lately. Lives in a tar-paper shack between here and Owensly Junction. Got a rotten piece of land."

"A tar-paper shack?" The words threw a swift picture before Effie's recollection. "I passed one, when I was lost. Nobody lived there, though."

"How d'you mean? Deserted?" He questioned her; yes, he said, the hut she had passed had surely been Peary's. It was the only one over that way.

"There was a rag doll," she murmured. "All alone. It looked like somebody dead." She felt her voice going away in a queer whisper.

"Yeh—Peary had a kid." He went on talking as if to himself, seeming quite unaware of the woman in his house. "Wife died last winter—couldn't weather it, especially with another one coming. Froze to death while she and the child were alone—no matches for a fire. Plenty of wood, but she couldn't light it. That's happened more than once in pioneer experience—once read it in a magazine story. More pleasing in fiction than fact," he added with a grim shrug.

"Yes," he resumed, lighting his pipe before starting back to work, "matches had got soaked by falling into the water pitcher. Peary started for town to get supplies, matches the most important. Blizzard blew up while he was driving home. Couldn't find the house—it was completely snowed under. . . . Kid pulled through, and he tried to go on taking care of her and dry-farming it, but he must have given up at last."

He sat for a little with his forehead against his clinched hand, his elbow on the table.

"So Peary's gone. That makes *me* the last of the A. E. F. right around here. One by one they've dribbled off."

"What became of them?" Effie asked hoarsely. Something had gone queer with her voice since hearing about Peary's wife.

He roused to her presence with a start. "Mostly they deserted—left their farms to rot, and lit out. Dick Otis killed a man he imagined was trying to steal his land—about the craziest delusion ever. The land wasn't worth taking as a gift, let alone the trouble of stealing it. Dick's lying low from the police. . . . Another starved to death—got so weak from want of food that his heart gave out and he was found in his shack."

"But what became of their wives and children?" Effie was still hoarse. She felt as though a string were tied tight around her throat.

"Didn't have any. Come to think of it, Peary was

the only married one in the bunch. All the rest went it alone. He stuck after all the rest—as long as his wife lived."

He paused. "I hadn't thought of that before," he said intently.

§

He rose. "Have to go to town on business tomorrow. Find out what you need—shoes, for one thing." He glanced at the ruined green sandals which had been her pride.

"Oh, I don't need much," she murmured hastily. "Nothing but shoes and something for my head—I never wore a sunbonnet, but I guess that's what I want—they're cheap, aren't they?" She was preoccupied; she added, following the stronger current of thought: "Will you be gone all—all day?"

"Most likely. Afraid?"

"No—oh, no," she fibbed. She was conscious of not hiding her fear.

He paused, scowling. "S'pose you've got to go along. Women are always like that."

"Oh, no. Nev' mind. . . . Maybe I will, though," she added weakly.

He started out, scowling still more heavily. At the door he turned. "Sheep men are off for weeks—sometimes two or three months, with the sheep," he said.

Effie felt her lips parting, knew that her eyes stared

roundly at him through pallor. "What—do their wives do?" she heard herself whisper.

"Keep house." He was gone.

§

All that afternoon it went over and over in her head while she laundered her own and Vic Trench's garments, and mended her skirt and sweater with the meagre bachelor sewing equipment which she found stowed in a canister labelled "Salt." Mrs. Peary frozen in that shack. Wood piled in the stove, waiting for the matches. Unkindled wood looks horribly cold. Then the picture as she had seen it—loosened ends of tar paper flapping, scarecrow-wise, in ragged desolation. Hard, graying earth cracked open, parched and rough, like chapped lips. The one sordid room, its solitary occupant lying there in her gaudy red dress as though defying the bleak landscape.

What had the little girl done when her mother died? Effie found herself speculating. Had she known? Had she tried to wake her—poked her, shaken her, called to her, jerked at her clothing? Or had she played and eaten and slept, not noticing? Probably she had clung to the doll in the red calico dress. . . . The calico had white dots inside little black rings—Effie found the pattern fixing itself before her eyes. . . .

Over and over, every detail. And Vic's words: "Sheep men are off for weeks—months."

She set her teeth. She drove her needle in and out, faster, faster, and did not let herself look out at the ancient ocean bed. She mustn't look at it. She couldn't.

Anyway, she would go to town with him next morning, she temporized. That would take care of one day, at least. Yes, she would be ready to start early.

She slept brokenly that night and dreamed of the ex-service man who had gone crazy, of the tar-paper shack buried in snow—had its stovepipe stuck up through like a black winter twig? she wondered. And the little girl with the rag doll and the dead mother. . . .

Waking with a headache, Effie dragged herself out of bed, dressed hurriedly, and made the coffee while Vic was out at early work. He came in to breakfast smelling of sheep.

"Want to start as soon as I can," he said, splashing hurriedly in the kitchen basin. "Won't be back till night. I've fixed the sheep in the corral so they'll be safe with Blighty to keep an eye out. Well—coming?"

She had already laid out her sweater for the drive. But she felt misgivings.

"Maybe I could stand it—alone," she murmured irresolutely.

He cast a quickly scrutinizing squint at her through soapsuds.

"I—I s'pose, if I should get too lonesome, I could go to see some of—of the neighbours?" she inquired, weakening. Just then she had caught an uncommonly large

view of the ancient ocean bed through the doorway. Meeting his ironic smile, she pursued: "*Aren't* there neighbours—somewhere—behind those hills?"

"Yes. Gophers. Prairie dogs. Snakes. Magpies and curlews. Maybe a deer. Coyotes. A stray gray wolf, just possibly."

In a rush she felt her strength melt—like that butter on the stove, it struck her fantastically. "But—but *folks?*" she breathed.

"Folks, yes. But the nearest are five miles off, and then more miles to the next, and so on. Can't drop in—not on foot." He had finished cleaning up, and he stood now, studying her face. "Well—coming?"

Butter—melted—damp, squshy. Shapeless, a futile mush. But you can put it on ice. . . . At that instant it came to Effie that she stood at the forking of roads. If she gave in to weak dread and went along, she was clinging merely one day longer to the protection of human companionship. Things as they were had got to be faced sometime.

She grew abruptly taut and a stiff white feeling went over her. "I'm going to stay home," she said.

IV

§

LONG ago Victor Trench had owned an alarm clock which got all out of whack. It would run slow for a while, then fast, then not at all. Its alarm took to going off at ungodly hours. It was junk. One day he threw it on a pile of bedsprings and tomato cans which had retired from active business to a vacant lot.

But he had no sooner done so than he realized that he had no other alarm clock, no opportunity to get one that day, and he must be called for an early train. So he went back to the junk pile and extricated the dead clock from the clutch of a bedspring, and went to work to tinker it back to life. And it ran.

Driving home from town that evening, his memory capriciously called up the alarm clock. Two days ago he had thrown away his ranch—log shanty, depleted flock, barren acres—just as he had once thrown away the clock—no good, dead as a doornail—and as he had started to throw away himself. Then, at the instant of doing so, he had snatched both back. But to what end? Would he ever be able to tinker the ranch back to life? And he himself—would he ever again "run"?

He couldn't see it. He was dog-tired and despon-

dently hungry, having omitted the substantial hotel lunch which he usually took when in Minoleum. Nothing but a sandwich. He had hoarded every cent for certain purchases in the department store.

As he drove on, his thoughts plodded heavily over affairs of the day. They were dark enough, anyhow, and the lack of lunch was responsible for several extra coats of black paint laid over them. He had, with difficulty, arranged a loan to carry on for a while, but it was a small amount, and the interest was exorbitant. The banks were almost at the snapping point already, so heavy had been the failing farmers' drain upon them. And what good was a loan if you couldn't keep up the interest? Like asking for money to throw into a hole. Something possessed his sheep—they were maliciously determined to get sick or walk into the open jaws of the enemy.

An ex-service man—the very phrase rang like doom. There seemed some curse laid upon those who had fought. As he saw it, they had given their all, they had let go their personal interests for the big cause, and now the world didn't want them. Down and out. Look at the Wyoming group way off on the Shoshone Project—they had marched upon the wilderness as they had marched upon the Huns—heads up, to conquer. And now, what was Frannie Flat? A barren stretch of wilderness again, all the more tragic for the broken-down and deserted dwellings scattered over its sterile acres. Of all the A. E. F. men who had gone there to take

up the government's proposition, to plant and sow, almost none remained. . . . And others in various states. . . . There must be a special Nemesis awaiting the man who had served.

Blacker and blacker. There was no moon to-night as there had been on the night of the mad bargain. He thought of this with a grin that was consciously sardonic. Queer derivation that word had, he recalled whimsically —from a plant that screwed up the face of the eater. Oh, yes, his face was screwed up all right! . . . No wonder the moon had the reputation it had for causing lunacy—but it was a moonless, sane night enough now! . . . Twenty-seven miles. Felt like a hundred. . . . A light shot out from the dark blank.

It was the light of his house.

§

It stabbed the gloom, thrust sharply at him. He felt oddly startled.

"That's the first time I've ever driven out home here to a light," came to him. Queer feeling.

As he drew close to the house, he noticed that the curtains, instead of covering the panes, now parted invitingly in the centre and let the rays flow through newly washed glass. "She's been busy," he commented. He paused. Should he drive straight on to the garage, as usual? That was what he had started to do, but somehow the look of those parted curtains and

the light streaming forth gave him a strange impulse to call out and burst in.

The door opened. Effie stood there.

"Ah—oo!" she called into the dark. "That you?"

"Yeh." He jumped out. He wanted to ignore her situation, but before he knew it he had asked: "Get along all right?"

"Sure."

He entered. By the light of the now polished lamp he saw incredible things. This was no longer the chaotic, depressing abode that he had known for months of darkness. It shone. The little square windows had been scrubbed until they glittered, their curtains done up so that they hung like dainty billowing petticoats. Litter was everywhere cleared away—tools, kitchen utensils, clothing, papers, all the oddments that had been thrown on shelves, table, chairs, and floor in dismal disarray had vanished like stampeding beasts driven into their proper corrals. The stove was polished, its nickel gleamed. A torn chair cushion had been mended. One splash of bright colour broke upon the dullness of the room, washed over it like a glinting wave that casts a spray of radiance. It was a runner of brilliantly figured silk thrown across the bare deal table. Vic merely marvelled; he was never to know, always to be tantalized by a finger on lips, by a dancing, bob-wagging imp of deliciously hugged secrecy who would never reveal that her conclusion had been, "Who wants to wear a costume slip on a sheep ranch, anyhow?"

"Gee!" was all he said. But he looked keenly at her. He saw that she was physically tired; but a new aliveness shone in her face. That stunned look of dread was gone. She was interested, competent, brisk, and self-possessed. She was, moreover, freshly groomed in spite of a day's hard work.

"You must be all in," he couldn't help saying. "I'll get my supper."

"No, I'll get it for both of us. I waited for you. It's nicer that way. And everything's ready to clap on. I'm going to toast the dance sandwiches nice an' crisp 'cause they're pretty dry."

He went to put away the car, never having acquired the true Westerner's habit of turning his Ford out on the range to toughen it, like the broncho, in all weathers. As he went, he thought: "Who ever heard of fixing up left-over sandwiches like that?"

Before running the car into the garage, he unpacked. "The things are here—under the seat," he called to her. "I got everything on your list—blueing and tapioca and the rest."

"Oh, thanks. Now I can really keep house." She followed him out, to carry in the parcels, and returned to the house, hands full.

"Here are some other things," he mumbled behind her. His hands, too, were full. "Hope the shoes fit," more mumblingly. "Here."

He was sticking them at her—packages and packages.

"But I—I didn't send for—not for all *those* things!

They're not for *me?*" She was stammering. The flush of surprise flooded up to her temples. She began opening parcels. "Aprons—gingham dresses—two of 'em! Pink an' green! An' stockings—why, it's a reg'lar trousseau!"

"Asked the woman in the department store how to fit up a sheep man's wife. She said these would start you." He had never in his life felt so queer and shy. Did she like 'em? he wondered. He found himself short of breath, while he hung in suspense. She was astonished, grateful, he could tell that, but whether she really *liked* the things. . . .

The *pièce de résistance*—he held it up. A broad, floppy straw hat, which had cost several times as much as the sunbonnet which she had suggested.

"Isn't flossy, but it'll keep off the sun," he grumbled. "Here. Try it on."

Her puzzled surprise cleared away like a fog, her face all at once lighted. Like the house. The way it had suddenly shone out at him.

"Oh, boy!" she cried. "Aren't you the king! Say, but they're grand!" She put on the hat, blossomed up at him from under it, star-eyed, soft-lipped.

"Pipe Rose o' the Plains now!" she murmured with a little sob of laughter.

§

Alone that day, Effie Galpin had stood in the middle of the living room of her new home and had looked real-

ity straight in the eye. Living room, yes. She was going to live there—always, maybe. Flight was over. Facts were here for keeps. You couldn't run away from them forever.

And so, in a solitary log shanty at the bottom of an ages-gone ocean, she had rolled up her sleeves, tied a handkerchief over her New York coiffure, taken broom and scrub rag, and proceeded to see what she could make of things as they were instead of things as she had dreamed them. With mop and brush for weapons, she had made her first charge upon reality instead of running away from it. She had smutted her face, broken off three finger nails below the quick, bruised her knees in protracted floor-scrubbing, and doubled her spine to a hairpin until every muscle in her body felt like a toothache. But she had made her start. She had faced the fray.

One woman, risking her life for the cause of nations, is officially put to death. Another is engulfed with a sinking ship while her voice, leading all the rest, rings forth in a triumphant hymn. Effie Galpin got down on her knees and scrubbed the floor with Gold Dust. One wonders if their examination marks are not all about the same when the Teacher turns in the report cards.

§

Vic whistled while he put the car away. His lips were rusty, it was so long since they had indulged in

melody, but they screwed themselves into "Tipperary" and "Over There."

"She sure did like the things. Looks great in that hat," he assured himself. Lucky he'd struck that woman in the department store to advise him. . . . Who wanted one of those heavy hotel lunches, anyhow?

He had sacrificed his own comfort for a woman. He had laid gifts at her feet. He had thrilled at her delight. To an observer he might have appeared clumsy, grudging, brusque, uncouth; but, for him, he had risen to heights of graceful chivalry never before dreamed of.

That night he sat up by the lamp which had been cleaned. It was no longer covered with oil and insects. He read *The Possibilities of Sheep Raising in the State.*

"I'll pull the flock together," his thoughts ran, in a stream parallel with the reading. "Sheep. Yes. They're the big idea for this country. I'll have a good talk with the county agent. There's bound to be a future for 'em with modern methods plus this natural grazing land—a big future!"

V

§

AT SUNRISE the curving river of mist cleared away and showed the real river that lay beneath it. The water was yellow, and forth from it clutched the bleached bones of dead trees. Blue cranes waded, and flew low above it, their bodies reflected in flight upon its metallic surface.

When the sun was up the soap-weed flowers opened, creamy as water lilies. There were small, low-growing sunflowers and mauve bergamot.

At sunset there was a bonfire behind the buttes.

§

Day after day Effie looked forth from the window of the log house and saw the gray blotch that meant sheep. The sombre sheep, the biding sheep. They awed her. She was afraid to know them; she felt them aloof. There was a still fortitude about them as of humans who have suffered and grown wise, and it made her feel shy and inferior. Day after day they endured patiently the same hopeless life, as though resolved to wait unresistingly and meet the end in sorrowful quiescence. They were meek, and yet their meekness held implicit

within itself a sort of proud comprehension as though they knew their fate was to be but sheep, the first animal ever domesticated by dominant man, and they were accepting it as a weary cross to be submissively borne.

With her hands in the dishpan she would look out upon the ocean of emptiness and see what the women of ancient days used to see from their tents: the man following the flock. Day after day these figures were the only brush strokes upon a canvas so vast as to terrify her by its mere endlessness. Nothing stopped it but the horizon: and the horizon of this land wore none of the delusion of others. In another place it convinces you that it is an ending; on the plains, it confesses its own mendacity and reveals the fact that it is but a limitation of the sight. You know that it will not stop you; you know that, on and on, beyond and still beyond, stretches the everlasting nothing. So Effie knew it: lonely infinity, and, dots upon the surface of that infinity, the man and the sheep.

For many days she did not seek to approach the band. She watched them standing in a mass, shifting slightly for better grazing, always patiently acceptant. Now and then Vic would call the dog and move them to another spot where the woolly ground-hugging grass was juicier; or he would drive them to the river. Then the drab mass would lengthen, draw itself out into a broad line, and slowly move, a sombre caravan, across the canvas. Beside it, an Abel, walked the upstanding figure of the

man: evolution's creature, who had fought his way to the erect posture through ages of struggle, who had developed memory and reason, and so achieved the power to direct, master, and possess those other creatures which had remained upon all fours. . . .

Effie was incapable of thinking all these things. And yet some dim sense of them reached her as she looked forth from her tiny crudely made window in a log wall upon this epitome of world history. The pane through which she saw it was no smaller, no more blurring than the mental window through which every human must look forth upon life in its wholeness.

§

The sheep were all Vic's. He might yield to woman where fowls and the dishpan were concerned, but he was master of the flock. As such he went and came, cared for the beasts, drove and guarded them, without discussing the matter. Women were always butting in once you gave them a show.

But at length she began to display curiosity. "What they going to eat when it comes winter?" and "Don't they ever drink 'cept when you take 'em to the river?" and other impertinent queries. As though it were any of her business. Snoopy.

"Vicky. Take me out an' show me 'em."

"Hh! Busy!"

Take her out and show her the band! Why, she'd

stay all day and ask nine hundred and ninety-nine questions! Butting in! Woman style!

"Please, Vicky. I oughta get 'quainted with 'em, now I'm going to live here."

"They don't want to get acquainted."

Nevertheless, as he was lighting his pipe after dinner he paused in the doorway.

"Come on, if you've got to. But, remember—I'm in a damn hurry."

§

Effie's knowledge of the ovine race had been limited to the urbane flock in Central Park, and to those classic animals, the Little Lamb that Mary Had, and the wandering pets of Bo-Peep. But as she approached this Western band, steeped in the dust of the plains, disillusioned by the bitter sterility of barren miles trod to wrest a frugal cropping from the soil's penury, they wore no poetic glamour. She saw them as despondent as the desert from whose womb they had sprung.

Vaguely she had expected to discover at least a few clad in fleece as white as snow; but no. They were uniformly attired in drabbled wool, and they showed no sign of appealing devotion as had Mary's. Far from it. If everywhere that Effie went those sheep had been sure to go, she might have found them touching. But they had not the slightest inclination to do so. They drew back and stared coldly at her, as if wondering

why on earth Trench had brought her along too for them to support. And they sang the notes of the scale in hit-or-miss discords that made her stop her ears.

"So! You don't like 'em!" Vic said. He looked on with secret satisfaction. She'd learn that the sheep were not her affair!

"They kinda scare me. I s'pose I'm not used to annymals." She paused, afraid to go nearer; but of a sudden she caught sight of the lambs. They, with their mothers, were at the other side of the band.

He saw her go pink with delight. She cried out—fool things, the way women do. "The sweeties! Haven't they got the cutest noses? An' look at their eyes—as loving as puppies'!" Her fear had melted in one warm rushing torrent. He saw her glowing, maternal. "Oh, they're the darlingest ever! I'm going take one in the house an' keep it grow up for a pet!"

Not much she wouldn't! He gloated inwardly as he observed that the lambs had their own ideas as to *that*. One would stand gazing at her with a naïve expression of infantile trust until just as she descended, arms open, to embrace it; when, with a "Ma-ha-ha-haa!" of hostile alarm, it would toss its head, shake its tail, and go galloping off to its mother, who would shelter it defensively while she rolled eyes of reproach toward the would-be kidnapper. Each lamb in turn did exactly the same thing. He relished the thought that it appeared to be a frame-up.

He led on grumblingly. "Lambing pen." He

pointed to a rough stout enclosure, containing several little stalls. "Look at it quick. Got to get back."

"The *what* pen?"

"Lambing. Lying-in hospital. Where the ewes have their lambs in April or May—if they don't cast 'em ahead of time, which'll probably be my cussed luck. Cold here then, and they need shelter."

"Oh." She pondered. "They get their little babies."

"Yeh." He was leading on, more hurriedly.

"Vicky."

"Hh?" He walked faster. He had to get back to work. He had no time to fool, showing a woman around. She trotted to keep up.

"Vicky, d'you like little babies?"

"I *do* not. They yowl."

"Oh. Yes—I s'pose so." She turned to the pen that he was showing her, beyond.

"For shearing," he was saying. "That's in June. Men hired by the day. I'm not on a big enough basis to use the machine. Men work with big shears. Strip 'em bare."

"Indians?" she cried with sudden recognition. "Like in that pickcher—'Ramona'?"

"Yeh—breeds, anyhow. Now I'll show you the sheep wagon and *that's all*—get me?"

The wagon was a revelation—a complete house on wheels. She went through it with her terrier nose

sniffing and wrinkling in glee, while she cried, "My lollipop!"

"A stove! An' a cupboard! An' shelves, an' drawers, an'—what's this?"

"Table—lets down on hinges."

Enchantment! Magic palace! As packed with marvels as a fairy's dwelling! A complete and flawless playhouse with bunk, folding table, kitchen equipment, hooks and drawers for clothing, folding easy chair. "Boy, I could live in it forever! Oh, say, lemme go 'long next trip? An' keep house for you?"

"Hh! No room for a woman!"

§

He fell silent: she did not know that her burst of enthusiasm had recalled to him his own at first sight of these canvas-covered dwellings, suggestive of the old-time prairie schooner, under whose "tarp" the wandering herders of generations have sheltered, safe from the cruellest storms. To him the wagon had been the most vividly picturesque relic of the old West still extant. The gipsy lure was in its rocking, seductive hips as it travelled, the secret of the patteran lay whither it vanished over the hill. In those first days of his the sight had set vibrating all his chords of romance and adventure.

That, he was thinking, was the West heard from afar

—romance and adventure. A mighty symphony whose theme is heroic achievement, whose motifs are titanic passion, dauntless courage, the new, the bold, the stormily poetic, the superbly majestic. Such chords had still been ringing in his ears when he had come from the East where dishonest fiction has created a myth, where ignorance has nurtured it.

And then—the romantic music dying out, the bitter motif of reality heard in all its grimness. Drab, searing labour, labour that leads only to ultimate failure. Man pitting his very soul against overwhelming odds. . . .

Habit furrows out its own brain grooves. For the moment, he had slipped into the worn track of his old broodings. He started, broke from his reverie as he felt her plucking at his sleeve.

"Vicky. While we travel, I could make you pancakes on that stove on the wagon."

He regarded the idea. "Your pancakes aren't bad," he admitted. It was fulsome flattery for him. He saw her flush with pleasure, and he hastened to correct his mistake. "But I don't care much about 'em, anyway," he muttered, and hurried back to work.

VI

§

THE world-old struggle: the struggle of man, woman, beasts, the soil; eternally united in the bond of mutual dependence, eternally divided in the battle to wrest or withhold from one another, each for the individual need.

The drama was as elemental as the Old Testament. In the midst of the wilderness, the dwelling; beside it, the flock; within it, the man and the woman—building, toiling, nurturing, showing kindness, angering, cohabiting. Man striving as primitively as a savage for shelter, food, and clothing, the three primal necessaries. Woman striving to keep, prepare, improve, mend that which man provided. It was life stripped bare of civilizing veneer, life stated in its crudest terms: genesis. Man, woman, beasts, the soil, struggle.

§

Summer was far along, it was too late to plant until another season. But, "I'll get busy and plough up the weeds," Vic said to Blighty. As his wont was, he

ran on to the dog. To the woman he rarely talked except in the briefest phrases. It was "you" in speech, "she" in thought. He had not even incorporated her name in his vocabulary; a fool name, anyhow, he had said from the first. He had no time to waste talking affairs over with her. Besides, who said he had to tell a woman his plans? Or account to her for his acts, his comings and goings? He went hot as the thought rose. As a matter of fact, Effie had attended to her task with never a question concerning his, but fantasy pictured her demanding to know his affairs, and he was seized by a sudden fury. Women were always trying to butt in.

He was working these days as he had never guessed that the human mechanism of brain and muscle could be driven to work by the self behind it. He had his breakfast by the first light, then was off. For long there had been no damages repaired, no upkeeping done. The boards of the sheep enclosure were breaking down here and there and must be replaced. The bedding ground was in bad shape for the lambs, owing to heavy rains early in the season. New supplies of all sorts were needed; he must send to the mail-order house in Chicago for sheep bells—that was a good kind, four-sixty a dozen with straps; for shears—might as well get the best steel, and the kind you could take apart for sharpening—one seventy-five, gosh, but you had to have 'em—however, they could wait till shearing; but that capsule outfit, with a balling gun and jaw spreader, had better be on

hand now, ready for sickness. If you were going to *get* anywhere, you had to throw yourself into it. If you were ever going to be a sheep man, you had to *be* a sheep man!

The cow and the horse required little care, and Effie was learning to milk. She had taken the chickens and turkeys as her own, too, farm-wife style. One thing, though: the egg money would never be all *she* got after working like a nailer. If the ranch ever yielded, she'd get her share. This taking all the profits he'd seen enough of. The old-school farmer exploited his women as an owner of colonial days did his slaves—beat them with his tongue if not the lash, drove them from task to task while they cowered—and what did they get? The egg money! He'd like to see anybody call him *that* kind of brute! Again he went hot and prickling at his own fantasy, although no one had called him anything. . . . So the opposing currents of the mind seethed in a turmoil of sex hostility, sex tenderness, hate, desire. It was his courtship and post-nuptial period in one, and represented loverhood as far as his darkly turbulent nature could know it. Beneath a lifetime's repressions whirled the emotional pool in blind confusion. He was working indefatigably, working to exhaustion, and for the woman toward whom he was churlish, about whom he complained angrily to his thoughts. Emotional conflict must be either constructive or destructive; in Vic's case, it drove nails, spaded ground, cleaned the barn, made new nests for the hens,

and sent to the State Board of Health for directions as to making a sanitary cesspool.

Above all, he toiled at the sheep. Other yields were by-products, the flock was paramount. The sombre sheep, the patient sheep. Biding, enduring. Somehow they demanded that you keep faith with them, they trusted you so implicitly. Yes, it was upon the flock that his fortune hung. He must take a fresh start, must check the losses among them and go to work to build up their number. If only he could pull them through the winter, and then get his ewes in good shape before lambing, the next summer would see him on the road to being a sheep man sure enough.

§

To Effie the cups of the days were so brimful of work that they yielded no space for thought except as a trifle of it collected in sediment at the bottom. This sediment was made up of vague wondering, remembrance, speculation, perplexity, dread, interest, curiosity, determination, doubt—but never wishing. Wishing, for the time at least, was dead. She had lived on wishes all the years of her remembered life, and, while carrying on a most practical and industrious outer life, had intoxicated herself secretly with dreams of some worldly fairyland where she passed haughtily through admiring throngs, clad in Fifth Avenue evening gown and slippers, to sup at a crystal-adorned table on lobster

Newburg and *pêche Melba*. Her wishes had been like a raft of decaying wood to which she had clung, floating precariously on the waves of reality. And at least the waves had risen to stormy heights and the raft had capsized. Not a plank of it was left to cling to. She was cast upon the waters to sink or swim. And Effie had set her small jaw and chosen swimming.

She began by surveying her "job"; its requirements, its possibilities. Here she was, called upon to make a home for a man who could provide so little for its upkeep that ingenuity was taxed to its last resources. Poverty and remoteness combined to make her problem almost insurmountable. And in that very fact she was finding appetite for adventure. A queerly flavoured kind of adventure it was, tempting her palate—acid, sharp, but whetting. She was, as she termed it, "up against" difficulties that she had never guessed could exist.

For one, there was the elemental need of bread. In her urban experience, the staff of life had always been something that "came so"; you could no more fancy making your own loaf than making your own rubber overshoes. Mrs. Whelpley had leaned upon the staffs of the bakery and the delicatessen: flat-chested pies, snake buns, and "weeneys" had figured importantly in her *menu*. Effie had done much of the family cooking, but had learned to depend upon this piecing out, and now there was no piecing to be done. She hunted out, among the Iowa wife's relics, a butter-smeared

cook book and set to work to fathom the mysteries of cake, bread, and pies.

Beyond eggs, milk, and now and then a few late vegetables, the ranch had nothing to offer. To Vic's frequent proposals that they kill a chicken, she clamped her lips in stern refusal.

"We'll never get ahead if we let ourselves begin that way. Same with the turkeys. We gotta fatten 'em for Thanksgiving. Poultry's high now, an' we gotta sell 'em even higher, for extra fancy, they're getting so cocky." Unconsciously she protruded her chest and strutted like her own fowls when she talked of them.

He grunted. "What about *us?* Fancy prices won't do us any good. Starve to death before the sale's made."

"Have I been starving you? You know you ate seven them corn-beef croquettes to-day dinner. What's the matter killing one o' your old sheep?"

"Can't afford it. That's only done on ranches where there's a lot o' hands, so it won't be wasted. Two can't eat a sheep before it spoils, and it's no good canned like beef. . . . We *ever* going to have chicken?" he demanded sulkily.

"Sure. Special 'casions. Your birthday. When is it?"

"Hh! Birthday! *I* don't have a fool thing like a birthday!" He strode from the house upon long, indignant legs.

Thus, on her own ground, she bullied him, although

nowhere else. The house and the fowls were hers. He reminded her that he had taught her what she knew of poultry culture, but this she had assimilated in one day, and the situation was now her own. Despite her innate dislike of live fowls, a loathing which amounted almost to a complex, she had made herself mistress of the coops. With primitive female instinct she defended fiercely her own domain. No intrusion would she permit. She ordered Vic to send to the "Ag" for bulletins on chicken and turkey raising, and she announced that these by-products of the ranch were to play an important part in financing the sheep over their period of hard luck.

He scoffed. "What do you know about farming? Said you never saw any place but Newark and New York in your life."

"Never did. But I know a turrible lot about making nothing cover everything. When I was a kid I had to piece down my own dress to make it cover my knees when I was growing, and I been doing that kind o' thing ever since."

She was applying a principle where she lacked experience. To her, the country was so little familiar that she had assumed that asparagus growing looks as it does in a salad. But it was proof of her imagination and flexibility that she could be plunged into a totally strange world and immediately set about applying the fundamental laws which had worked in Newark, New Jersey, trusting that they would work equally well in

the Bad Lands of the high plains. She had stretched both Mrs. Whelpley's marketing money and her own small savings to elastic length. She was above antistic weakness. What she purchased for herself in New York had been, according to her lights, the wisest and closest expenditure to achieve "stylish" results; there had been no feeble yielding to surviving infantile desires, such as the soda fountain and the French pastry shop. Head dictated; or, at any rate, it dictated to flesh. If heart in its turn dictated to head, that was, as her own idiom would have summed up, "something else again."

§

She induced Vic to drive her to Minoleum, where she sent him off and started on a tour of investigation alone. "What do people eat?" she inquired from shop to shop. "People that live twenty-seven miles out?"

The shopkeepers all purveyed to many such customers, and their suggestions were abundant. She laid in a stock of dried vegetables and fruits, such as split peas, navy and lima beans, small cheap prunes, apples, raisins, and a few apricots to be held in reserve for a special treat. Some cans of last year's vegetables were marked "reduced"; she gave herself a wise wink as she purchased these, knowing them to be quite as good as the new, once they were thoroughly aërated. Spaghetti would make a good dinner dish with a dash of cheese on

top. Baked beans and rice baked with eggs would make excellent hearty dishes. She did not know the term "meat substitutes," but she was providing them as sagely as any domestic scientist.

"You wanta get plenty o' salt pork," the butcher advised. "That's what fur-off folks mos'ly lives on."

Effie, in time, learned this to be only too true; the salt pork dinner is the standardized meal of the impecunious plainsman. Happily her instinct rejected this unctuous delicacy, except for rare emergencies. She must solve the baffling meat problem without it. Bacon must be kept on hand and served crisp; various egg dishes would go far; once in a while there could be tinned beef or salmon; and when Vic made a trip to town he could bring home some cheap cut of fresh meat. She chose a tough but juicy beef stew for that day.

Thus did Effie Galpin grapple with the same problems which had assailed thousands of pioneer women before her. The first covered wagons that blazed a trail across the plains sheltered women who lay awake at night staring at an uninterrupted skyful of stars through a puckered opening in canvas, racking their brains to devise a camp-fire substitute for the boiled dinner and pie of home tradition. The woman's instinct to tempt the palate and nourish the strength of those belonging to her is evidenced in mansion and log hut alike. Often fresh food has been the almost insurmountable difficulty in isolation—meat, fruit, and vegetables.

Women who have never heard the words "protein" and "calorie" have battled and gone hungry themselves to supply their men and children with these necessaries. The gun of the early pioneer solved the meat question where to-day game lurks warily; by way of offset, to-day's irrigation may furnish abundant fruit and vegetables in what was once desert. But the non-irrigated land suffers famine.

However, Effie returned home laden with the spoils of crafty economy and bursting with fresh ideas.

"Vic! I found out more things!"

"Kind o' things?"

"How to live on ten cents an' your nerve a day. Look here: next year we gotta have a smokehouse so's to make our own ham an' bacon, an' you gotta kill a cow an' I'll can her."

"Maybe. Next year. If I get a cow to kill."

"An' the grocer says all the ranch women go pick the choke cherries an' sand plums an' buf'lo berries, whatever they are, an' make jam an' jel. You find me where they grow, an' I'll put up dozens an' dozens!"

She thrilled to the adventure, to the thought of gathering wild growing things with her own hands. She was from a world in which sources are never directly tapped; everything is done for one; countless purveyors, commission merchants, middlemen of every sort stand between the consumer and nature's own bounty. Everything has been passed, on and on, before one receives it—handled, altered, prepared, de-vitaminized,

packed in bottle, jar, tin, or carton, labelled and rendered as remote from the original as the squeak of a weak phonograph is from the song of Caruso. Here, one picked the berries while one's man slew the beast! Effie went breathless; she was rapturously receiving what, in her psychological vocabulary, would have been called a "kick."

This highly energized reaction reached its climax a day or so later. "Busy this morning?" Vic asked.

"Not so turrible. Anything you want me to do?"

"Thought you might go along and help, since I haven't got a man. Got to go after coal."

"Sure. I'll get my hat."

As the wood supply (a pile of irregular logs cut and broken from cottonwoods along the river) was about giving out, she welcomed the prospect of replenishing fuel. "Going after coal" suggested some nebulous sort of coal yard, perhaps on a ranch. She asked no questions but climbed upon the wagon seat beside him, and sat singing to his taciturnity while he drove, broadcasting with as little consciousness of listeners-in as a meadow lark.

"Where's the coal yard, Vicky?" she paused to inquire at length.

He had not spoken since they started, and he did not speak now. With a flick of the reins he indicated a butte ahead. Like all the rest of the landscape, it was bare of human habitation. "But I don't see anything but the mountain!" she told him.

"Look like the rest of 'em?"

"Yes. Just the same—bare. Only it's got a big black stripe running acrost it, an' the rest are all brown an' red."

"That's it."

Still she could not understand. He drove up to the "mountain" and stopped. She saw that he had a pick in the wagon. He took it out, walked straight up to the big black stripe which was daubed horizontally across the face of the bluff, and drove in his pick, ripping open its vitals.

"Here's your coal," he said, pausing to mop his face. "It'll bake your next batch of bread."

She gasped. A world where man planted his own wheat and dug his own coal from the earth that woman might combine them in bread for their two bellies! A world where Adam and Eve met their own primitive needs with their own primitive resources, in a Garden of Eden such as she had learned of in her one visit to a Sunday school.

"Garden of Eden!" Effie's inarticulate meditations, unphrased but thought in substance, caught themselves up. For she heard them calling this a Garden of Eden. Jagged bluffs, earth gashes which had healed to dry scabs, dun plains, sterile solitude. . . .

Garden of Eden!

She did not yet know that she was finding beauty in it.

VII

§

MAN, woman, the wilderness. Always in the beginning, but never for long. Always a tree. An apple. A garden snake. The tree may spring up over night; it is the Community. It has many branches and it bears fruit fast; a breath of encouragement, and the apple reddens. As for the garden snake—he has been there all the time, under a night-blooming cereus, waiting. If he cannot find a cereus, he can make a clump of sagebrush do.

§

There were a few weeks of late summer when man, woman, and the wilderness had it to themselves. Except for her one expedition into town, when she talked only with shopkeepers on the theme of her larder, Effie had spoken to no one but the man with whom she shared a log hut. Vic had made a few business trips to Minoleum, paying off the high interest on his meagre loan with what the eggs, chickens, and lambs yielded in the market—only a few small sales at each trip, but they must somehow cover the needs. There was no longer

either leisure or gasoline to squander in useless travelling. Nowadays, when he drove that twenty-seven miles, he must reckon the cost down to the last cent, the last hour.

At first Effie felt no craving for companionship except on the few days when Vic was away. But as the weeks passed, she began to desire occasional relief from the wilderness; she wanted the Community. No danger signal flashed; she did not know it for the many-branched Tree, nor did she guess what fruit it bore.

The newspaper one day brought a notice of another dance at the schoolhouse, the last of the season, and therefore everyone was urged to make it "the biggest rally ever seen between the Twin Cities and the Coast." She read it over his shoulder.

"Vicky! A party! *I*'ll say that's grand! We can finish that dance we begun night I fainted away."

"Hh! *I* don't like to dance! Just did it to oblige you."

"You're a grand dancer, all same."

He "Hh'd!" again, crumpling the notice and stuffing it into the stove. He had to hurry out to work. But as he turned back to get the sheep-worm capsules and the jaw spreader for an animal suspected of disease, he saw Effie's face. . . . Women could be the deuce. What business had she to look as if he had hit her, and to be trying to conceal a tear in the biscuit dough! . . . Anyway, Bill'd be at the dance, and he wanted to see him. . . .

"If you've got to go, 'spose you've got to. I'll drive you over, and you can dance while I talk to Bill. But, remember, *I* won't dance. And I won't stay but a little while. No use for fool things like parties."

§

Under the clump of sagebrush the garden snake snuggled his coils.

VIII

§

THE one-time frontier to-day is a curious mingling of new and old, European and American, free and repressed. It is a film upon which many exposures have been made and remain distinct and incongruous; one can only speculate as to the future composite into which they may fuse.

Go to a country dance to realize this. These gatherings are still held in barns and schoolhouses as in the classic days of "The Virginian," and many of their customs are unchanged. The grown-ups still dance until daybreak, while babies sleep tranquilly in bundles under the benches along the wall, or in perambulators and clothes baskets parked in a corner of the room. Some are put to bed in the automobiles. Now and then one is forgetfully left upon a bench instead of under it; and sat on.

As of old, one still meets early-day ranchers, gray and weathered horsemen of the plains—men who like to tell you how they knew Roosevelt when he rode his cow pony forth from the Maltese Cross Ranch and met him at the stockmen's conventions in Miles City. They

are scrubbed and brushed and shining under their wide high hats and arrayed in boiled shirts for the occasion. Their wives, leather-skinned women with sagging breasts, wear the silk gowns that have done duty at social gatherings for five, ten, perhaps twenty years. Wiry daughters, girls used to housework and outside chores and the saddle, mingle with sons likewise sturdily brought up. The elders have little left but memories of the glorious epic days of the frontier. Their cattle are hundreds where once they were thousands; their lands lie shrivelled where once the wide range was their own. The saga is told.

Along with these are the farmers of a later day: men and women from "the East," which usually means Iowa or Missouri or Kansas or Nebraska, who pushed on whenever the cry of new land was heard. Some are now old-timers themselves, who once were intruders; they who fought the war of the wire fences in the rush to seize upon early homestead land. Others have been dribbling in and being starved out ever since. Among the more recent settlers are scattered members of the A. E. F., the ex-service men who have sought their problems' solution in the wilderness; and the Europeans.

These peasants from faraway lands know the soil as we never know it. They are a part of its very vitals. Heavy, toiling Scandinavians who resist hardship as a boulder resists. Poles, who will burrow out a home in the sod as an earth animal burrows, nuzzle there, con-

tent, as under the teats of a mother beast. Belgians, homesick, sentimental, stingy, excitable, lovable, who will stand at sunset on the barren plain and face the Fatherland beyond the sea, saying a prayer for those left behind, as did the Huguenot settlers of an earlier century; and turn from their "Amen" to raise the price of eggs to a chance customer. These and others are soon to be an integral part of that wonderful new composite, essential to its growth; the Old World's pouring of seed into the fertile womb of the New.

All of these groups are, for the most part, sober and demure; but the dances are enlivened nowadays by young townspeople, and often far from the best of them. It has come to be a fad for the pimply young men and the overdressed young women to motor out to the country dance, where they have more freedom than in town. They demand modern music, modern steps. And so, many an old wall that once echoed to the strains of the Virginia reel and the quadrille—many an old floor that once shook beneath the fierce onslaught of cowboys' merry heels—now trembles at the rhythms of fox trot and hesitation and—even so—of jazz. Where once raw but honest whisky flowed frankly and there was fair-and-square drinking, now are covert trips to automobiles parked in the shadow, and hypocrisy riots hand in hand with white mule.

And as many as are the groups, the traditions, the inhibitions, the inherited codes, the temperaments—so many are the varied outlooks upon that medium

through which the individual expression is wrought—the medium we call "life."

§

All afternoon the "neighbours" for miles around had been arriving at the Cottonwood schoolhouse, for the most part in motor cars, a few in wagons and on horseback, bearing huge baskets, boxes, and pails filled with refreshments.

"I got some very delikit san'wiches here," Mrs. Malmberg announced with an air, as she gave a pretentious tuck to the snowy napkin which covered them. She was an American; her husband, of Swedish birth, reared in Wisconsin, was the only rich farmer in these parts. She had been a small-town girl, very poor, and now, in the pride of possession, she rode upon her full bosom as a figurehead upon a majestic ship, and relished the sight of small craft hugging the shore at her approach.

"I got the receipt in the *Woman's Home Companion*. You gotta slice the bread thin as paper," she went on, puffing out her superiority sense as she might have blown up a toy balloon. Other people's sandwiches were usually of what Mrs. Malmberg considered an indelicate thickness. "Then you take the sammon, an' mix it with the salad dressin'." She pursed her lips in smug satisfaction over this sophisticated manner of serving the inescapable tinned fish.

But Em Billopp was not to be withered.

"Hmph! Delikit nothin'!" she sniffed, as she tied a handkerchief over her hair to make ready to sweep. It was iron-gray, and had been shingled closely long before the advent of the bob, to save trouble—Em would never have surrendered thus to fashion. Her figure was lean, big-boned, flat, powerful; her voice held the deep grit that is seldom caught in a woman's. She belonged to the period following that of the range—the era of early homesteaders. Years before, she had taken up land, clearing timber and grubbing sage with her own hands, breaking the wilderness like a man, fighting her way with no thanks to anybody. Men had wanted to marry her for her hard-earned money and because women were scarce. "S'long's you don't git soft, you kin always have a meal an' a chair by the fire," she would tell them, "but once you dare propose to me, I'll treat you like I treat a polecat at the chicken roost." No one had ever "got soft" a second time.

"Delikit nothin'!" she repeated. "All these noo idees folks is gittin' from the magazine clubs an' the movies an' their own sons an' daughters make me sick! Delikit san'wiches!" She fairly hissed it in her superb scorn. "I brung san'wiches made o' my own home-canned beef that was kilt on my own outfit, an' they're two inches thick. When folks dance, they need nourishment. An' I brung a crock o' baked beans, too. That's the kind o' delikit food we used to have at the ol'-time dances, an' if it did then, it'll do now!" With which indignant climax she fell to, wielding her broom

as if it had been a weapon of vengeance. The dust of the long-neglected schoolhouse flew from it in panic-stricken clouds. Even Mrs. Malmberg's bosom seemed to collapse and let her down, like a suddenly sinking ship.

Mrs. Gaudin, a timid little Belgian woman, came forward with her contribution to the feast, eager to display it. "I mek crim-chis balls," she said, offering a peep into the box. They were as dainty as the most fastidious housewife could desire. "They learn Marie mek them at Aggie. Marie say they chuck full calories."

"Calories? What's them?" demanded the scornful Miss Billopp, swinging about in a fresh attack, as if she suspected this creature to be some new enemy, perhaps similar to the chicken-roost thief. "I dunno what a calorie is, but I know I wouldn't have it in my house. I'd take it by the tail an' pitch it out a window. As for that cream cheese everybody's eatin' now-days—it's turkey feed, that's what it is! Who ever heard o' anybody but turkeys eatin' it till these hifalutin' times when the girls come back from Ag'culchal College an' tell their maws how to run their own homes!" She fell to storming a dusty corner furiously, while the author of the cream-cheese balls shrank to disappearance.

Breathless at the end of her attack, Miss Billopp paused to vent her roused opinions further.

"Everybody in the West's gettin' too notional these days. When us ol'-timers come out here, it was to live a plain honest life. But now the girls—what with

readin' a lot o' truck, an' buyin' foldiddles from the mail-order catalogue (all the way from a bathin' suit when there ain't no water, to a ouijy board when there ain't no ghosts), an' seein' the movies an' tryin' to act like 'em, an' callin' 'emselves dressed up when they ain't got no more on than a sheep after shearin'—they ain't worth the powder to blow 'em up. Though they got plenty of another kind o' powder on their little fool noses. Nor the boys, neither, with their silk stockin's an' their cigaroots. Not worth the powder to blow 'em up. All of 'em, boys an' girls, runnin' their cars into town all time, 'stead o' gittin' on a horse an' whoopin' her up on the range, like we used to do. Them was the times!"

"You, Miss Billopp, you be damn," forcefully put in one Mrs. Ulsky, a Pole. "I got five girl, four boy, not one go bad."

"Hmph!" The redoubtable Em was not to be outdone. "I'm a moral woman, but I declare I'd rather see a really worth-while one go wrong, in a good honest way, than grow up jus' trash."

It was a drastic statement, and it swept like a great wind through the branches of the Tree. They swayed. They rustled. Loudly they tossed.

§

Mrs. Malmberg led forth upon the floor, self-appointed to head the grand march of condemnation. "Well, for *my* part, I'm thankful to say *my* daughters

wear the White Flower of a Blameless Life." The girls of Minoleum's Baptist church had taken this particular White Flower as their emblem, and the Malmberg twins, Tilda and Ida, had embroidered it upon a banner which should ever float above their innocent heads. "No child o' mine'd so much as dance on the same floor with any girl like her Vic Trench picked up!" Her voice thinned to a hiss.

Others took it up. "I should hope not!" "Why, she ain't decent!" "My land, what turrible doin's!" rose the murmurs, the shrill whispers, the exclamations. Neighbours turned to one another, raised screening hands to their lips, passed horrifying delectable tidbits under the breath.

"Before I'd cheapen myself to any *man*——!" cried Lizzie Beady. Lizzie was the one who had compared Effie to Mrs. Sam Sims, the World's Homeliest Woman of the Tingaling Circus. Everybody knew that Lizzie always had to pretend to be taking care of the babies under the benches to hide the fact that nobody asked her to dance, whereas she would have preferred disposing of all babies in the Whisky Straight River.

Em Billopp, having taken a position, planted her feet upon it like boulders.

"There's some as'd be wallflowers in a minin' camp," she observed with a steely glare at Lizzie. "An' as fur this White Flower business"—she directed her attention to the Malmberg twins who lurked violet-like in the dusk of their overshadowing mother—"I'd ruther

meet up with a cactus flower or a thistle, thorns an' all, than one that was 'blameless' 'cause it was too dead-an'-alive to be anything else."

Again the chorus.

"Well, I *must say*——"

"I consider it ain't decent, talk like that."

"What d'you think that girl o' Trench's done? She had the face to go to town an' into all the stores, an' my Lillie seen her an' she jus' let down her eyes right on the sidewalk, an' cut right 'crost, so's everybody could see she wouldn't walk on the same side o' the street with her."

"Lillie's a lovely girl. So pure, like her name."

The branches were flinging themselves in Em's face. She met them. "Well, I'm thankful to say we wa'n't so pure in ol' times that we couldn't show charity. Never was any country where a woman's honour was respected like it was here in the West. I've knowed a woman to git lost in a storm an' go to a ranch fur shelter, where there wa'n't nothin' but men; an' the men'd all clear out to the cold bunk house fur the night, an' leave her have the ranch house to herself. *That* was the ol' West fur you! But we wa'n't so good we had to drive nails in other women's coffins."

"Say, them was the days!" They all turned to see Ulysses Pinker entering, laden with baskets. They forgot scandal for the time; they called out greetings to him as he set down his load, removed his tall felt hat, and wiped his crooked old face. Uly's white moustache

hung in two straight lines downward, as it had hung in its black days, when he was known as the best shot between the Pap and the Whisky Straight rivers. Still, at seventy-two, he was lean and flexible, and erect from years in the saddle. He still rode, still lived on his old cattle ranch, although it was but a relic of the past.

§

"No, the West ain't like it used to be," Uly went on, with that gloomy relish which the older generation always indulges in drawing these unflattering comparisons. "Take these here dances, now. Say, wa'n't it great when they called off, an' swung their pardners, an' made a reg'lar rip-snortin' night of it?"

"*I*'ll say it was!" Miss Billopp told him fervently, unconscious that she herself was employing the modern formula. "Them days, there wa'n't no bunny-hugs an' all. These new dances is as graceful as a jack rabbit lopin' out of a mush-melon patch!"

He nodded. "An' we all rid to the dances horseback, no matter how fur. No cars then!"

"You bet. 'Member that night Jim Tingley tol' Hen Benedict he'd shoot him right on the floor if he danced one more time with the girl Jim was engaged to? She was that un come from the East, with taffy hair an' a nose like a calf's—what *was* her name? Then Hen up an' says, 'An' *I*'ll shoot *you* to-night, Jim Tingley, if *you* dance once more with the girl *I*'m engaged to!' Then everybody looked at that girl—she had taffy hair,

don't you 'member—what *was* that girl's name? You know—nose jus' like a calf's—what *was* it? Well, anyhow—she stepped right out into the middle o' the floor, jus' as bold, an' she says, 'Then that makes it simple for me, gents,' she says, ' 'cause I'm engaged to both o' you, an' I can't decide which un to marry, but if you shoot each other to-night, then I won't have to worry which.' "

"I 'member, I 'member!" cried Uly in delighted recollection, while the other old-timers joined in his shout and the newcomers listened with absorbed interest. "An' the girl skipped nex' day with both o' their money!" he went on, taking up the tale. "An' 'stead o' shootin' each other, they shook hands an' jined pardnership on the QL Ranch, an' made a fortune. Say, you bet them was the days!" He slapped his knee as recollections tumbled in upon him. "When we danced, we danced! Didn't walk round lookin' like wooden dolls in a shootin' gallery!" He gave way to the mood; he burst into an old song by which he had been known almost a half century before:

"Oh, swing your pardners all way round,
Cheer up while you ain't underground!
When ol' Gabriel's horn he toots,
Tell him that you died in your boots!"

Cries greeted the ditty. The old Westerners clamoured. "Give us a call-off dance now!"—"Git on the

bench, Uly!"—"Ain't nobody kin call off like Uly!"—"Git up there!"—"Uly, Uly!"

The young townswoman and her "gent'man friend" who were ready at piano and violin smiled good-temperedly and struck up an air. Uly mounted a bench. His lean arms waved, his raucous old voice brayed forth his favourite melody:

"When the ki-otes wild is a-howlin' where you're buried,
(*First couples for'ard an' back!*)
You'll think o' the gal you mighta married.
(*Balance corners!*)
Oh, swing your pardner, every man,
You'll be dead some day, so dance while you can!"

The sets had sprung into form on the instant of his first measure, and soon eight couples were gyrating on the floor, skirts revolving in the fiddle's breeze, long, loosely trousered legs leaping and kicking. Forward and back they swung, left and right, whirling, skipping, prancing, joining hands and spinning, letting go with a swirl and a shout.

But Uly demanded his payment. When the gaiety was at its height, fanned by the bellows of his ardour and art, he sprang to the floor.

"Oh, grab her tight an' hold her hard,
Sweetheartin's over when they chuck you under sod!"

He snatched the austere Miss Billopp by both hands,

broom and all, and spun her until her gingham skirt stood out like a horizontal revolving wheel. Her flat, tall bony figure gave way to the spell of the rhythm; her broom bounced and thumped as it spun with her; Uly flung her off only to rotate about her and seize her again, while together, to the rousing applause of all onlookers, they shouted forth the old tune:

"Oh, swing your pardner, every man.
You'll be dead some day, so dance while you can!"

It was known all along the Whisky Straight River that Uly Pinker had wanted to marry Em Billopp ever since, a high-hearted "modern" girl of the past century, she came bravely into the West to make herself a home. The sweep of freedom was like a plains wind across the broad clear stretch of her mind. He had wanted her not for her little hoard, nor as a mere antidote to the loneliness of bachelorhood, but because she was Em Billopp. But, although in the past he had faced undaunted all the traditional desperadoes, stampeding herds, bucking bronchos, and Indians on the warpath, he had never dared request the hand of the formidable Em. Long-stifled emotions, however, roused in him a savage ardour now as he shouted the refrain and clutched her about the waist:

"Oh, grab her tight an' hold her hard,
Sweetheartin's over when they chuck you under sod."

Off he bore her in a wild polka down the room. They

were crackling old brown leaves in an autumn gale. They flew, they clung as the gale swooped them. "Say, Em——" he whispered. A hundred times before, over more than a quarter century, he had whispered, "Say, Em——" But that was as far as he ever got. Whether, at this hundred-and-first time, he might have made the plunge, will never be known, for the commotion of arriving cars interrupted. In burst a little throng of hilarious girls and young men.

It was "the Minoleum crowd." There was the smell of perfume, of the barber's shop; the flicker of shaken earrings; the scurry of thinly clad pink legs; the humming of a new jazz bit; the fling-about of slang.

"Fox trot, fox trot, come along, fox trot!"

And, all to the same music as the quadrille dancers, they flung themselves into the strange gyrations of the Twentieth Century, chanting while they trotted:

"Come along, my Cutie, Time is beating it,
We got to dance before he gets away,
The sere and yellow will arrive some day,
But we're—not—dead—yet!"

"Same idee!" murmured Uly. "'When they chuck you under sod.' 'Dance while you can.' 'The sere an' yeller.' Every bunch o' young critters hurryin' to round up Life an' corral it 'fore it gits away. Us old uns, too. Same idee."

The music was a medley, drunken, inciting. Suddenly a little group of Scandinavian peasants, but recently from the old country, sprang from their corner, and with a nodding, a clapping, broke into one of their own folk dances, "The Garland and Crown." One hand on hip, the other curved above the head. . . . Swaying, stamping. . . . Heels beating time, bodies rocking, palms clapping, in the intoxicating gaiety of rhythm that throbs nowhere as in the pulse of the Old World peasant.

"Hej hopp! En roliger dans,
Hej hopp! Bad krona och krans te' dansen."

Rufus Snake Head, riding that way, dismounted at a short distance from the schoolhouse and stole up to it. No one noticed him; he slid toward a window and his dark face cast no shadow as he peered in, observing with silent attention.

No Tower of Babel was ever madder. Here, on the floor of an isolated schoolhouse of the plains, danced the old frontier, the Land of the North, and Twentieth Century America with its "shimmy," while the aborigine looked on. And all to one riotous tune. Music screamed, heels clattered, the medley of songs in the Swedish tongue, the old frontier tongue, the tongue of modern slang crashed upon the air. Everyone was whirling, the crowd was bewitched, as though piped forth by some mischievous piper's sorcery to this incongruous mingling.

"Hello, folks!"

Merely a small bright chirp of greeting—half shy, half sure, all friendly. But as if a bolt had struck, everyone was instantly aware of electricity present. The music clashed, fell still; the dancers stopped short and turned to the door. Effie had entered a few steps and stood smiling in their midst.

IX

§

THE Swedish peasants halted in their postures like automatons at the sudden checking of the spring—here an arm akimbo, there one curved high in air. The quadrille partners stood, soldiers at attention. The cheek dancers parted a trifle, to stare at the intruder. Over the room, heavy, dreadful, hung the pall of silence.

"H—hello——"

Effie's attempt was faint. She was puzzled: everything had so strangely stopped at her entrance—as at the pressing of a turn-off button—and the moment before had been an uproar of merriment. Some story she had once heard flickered across her mind—in school, perhaps—about a company of revellers changed by black magic to stone. . . . Stone, that was what they were; stone figures. All gazing at her like the faces one sees on the edge of a cliff.

"H—hello——"

Again she murmured it tentatively, trying to make out whether they had failed to hear. But they must have heard, through that megaphone of silence. Per-

haps they did not recognize her—they had seen her only once, and that for but a few minutes as she danced with Vic and fainted in his arms—why, of course! Naturally, they must take her for a stranger! How could they be expected to do otherwise?

She laughed a little, nervously. "You—you don't remember me—sure you wouldn't!" There was wistful timidity in her voice, as of a child who wants to be friends and is uncertain of the response to its appeal. "I never was here but onct. But I remember you all fine. I—I'm the girl got lost an' wandered all over the place till I hit on this here dance hall. Lucky for me, I guess. I might be roaming over the Bad Lands yet, or living in a prairie-dog hole, if I hadn't 'a' dropped in. . . ."

The silence was relaxing a trifle. Some were establishing themselves in seats against the wall, the better to settle down and observe, as in a theatre; others were moving forward, pressing to see and hear. . . . The coyote eyes of Beady gleamed hungrily from a corner. . . . It was Mrs. Malmberg who appointed herself spokesman.

She advanced with sail full set. Halting in the middle of the floor, face to face with Effie but at some distance from her, she made reply:

"Yes. We remember you—*perfec'ly !*"

And Mrs. Malmberg tossed her head in a fling so impressively vast that it seemed to defend at once all of woman's honour, civilization's moral code, the Baptist

Church, and the embannered White Flower of a Blameless Life.

There were no audible voices of support, although whispers could be seen to pass between neighbours. But the spirit of endorsement filled the room like a wind. Girls tittered, or breathed an "Aw!" of scorn. Older women "Hmph'd!" with the indignation of the righteous. Men looked amused or disapproving, as the case might be. But everywhere now there rose a buzz, a humming of the roused Tree. And although Effie's ears could distinguish not one word, her mind heard every utterance.

There were those among the Europeans who listened, looked on, and speculated gently, their interest as keen as that of a child in a new tale, as untinged with criticism. They had accepted the account of Effie's tragic adventures at its face value. Arbitrary lines drawn upon the surface of morality no more existed for the most primitive of these Old World peasants than does the Equator exist for the jungle native who all his life passes back and forth over it, unaware from birth to death that he is crossing a boundary.

American farmers, and some Americanized aliens, from the rural Middle West, reared in the tradition of the hemmed-in community, wore lifted eyebrows and drawn-in lips. Such carryings-on were to be accepted at anything but face value—especially where beauty was involved. Who believed that story about her being fooled and coming West to get a job singing? They

rolled their curiosity upon their tongues, seasoning it to taste with eager blame.

The young women from Minoleum were shocked. Some dressed with scant decency and danced with less, and morality varied among them. But they at least strove to live up to the code of not being found out, and here was a stranger in their midst who had made not even an attempt at secrecy.

The old plainsfolk were disapproving, though with less hostility. Moulded in that most romantic chapter of our national history—the winning and breaking of the West—romance is ever dear to them. When a pretty girl tumbled in from the skies and fainted, and handsome Vic Trench carried her off, it had smacked of old days when a damsel was snatched to a saddle and galloped away with. Their sympathies were engaged. Had there been, as in old days, a mad marriage on the spur of the moment, every old frontiersman and woman would have danced the couple home at daybreak. But now they shook their heads. This was not the old West, where, in the midst of such lawlessness as our country has never known elsewhere, the law of a woman's honour was held sacred. No. *This* was not the old West!

Through the dark window the aborigine looked in upon the scene. He knew. He understood. White man, white woman. Other white men, other white women, say bad. White men, white women, say one thing, do another. Sometimes white man go be squaw man, same time got white wife, no tell. All very queer.

Rufus Snake Head held silence. Aloof, from the distance of other centuries, he looked on at the drama in which he played no part—looked on and marvelled.

And the Tree, with its multitude of leaves, various in their voices, rustled on. Interest, hostility, diluted charity, censure, indignation, smug virtue, amused observation, disgust, relish, outrage, all rustled together in one giant hum. But dominating, rising above all other moods, was condemnation.

§

The scene could have been reckoned by only a few instants of time, and, except for Mrs. Malmberg's veiled comment, no charge had been made. But Effie, dumb, slowly whitening, knew the sense of penal eternity.

Where was Vic? If only she could feel him beside her! Stunned, she forgot for the moment that he had dropped her at the door and had gone for a ride and a talk with Bill. She looked around the group, searching vainly, stupidly for him. . . . Oh. . . . Yes, she remembered. . . . She was alone.

She sickened. Drops gathered in a clammy row across her upper lip, a cold clutch seemed to hold the back of her neck. She had never before known to the full what being alone could mean—not even when she had roamed the wilderness. Now it was as though she heard gates being fastened against her, fastened with a pious violence, with a clatter and clank of key in lock.

She recalled in a flashing memory that story of the Garden of Eden. Yes, it was like being driven out of Eden, like feeling it close behind her.

Eden! A grand place, a fine garden—maybe a sunken garden! Think of calling this desert by such a name! And yet, looking back upon her world as it had been up to this hour, it seemed indeed a place of bliss from which she was forever barred. Alone. Solitary in her universe. . . .

But she made no move of retreat. She forced back the wave of sickness. She was very white, but she wouldn't let her knees shake. She stiffened the calves of her legs; she made ramrods of them.

Mrs. Malmberg gave another superb fling of the head.

"An' now you've int'rupted our dance," she said, clipping her words as if with a knife, "maybe you'll be obligin' enough to let us go on." Mrs. Malmberg congratulated herself upon what she considered supreme *finesse;* she had not mentioned any indelicate matter at all, and yet she felt that her implication was satisfyingly complete. The creature could hardly fail to realize that she was cast out! With the movement of a hen covering imperilled chicks, Mrs. Malmberg, clucking, swept her brood of two back to a corner safe from harm.

"She'll let us go on, all right; an' she'll jine in with us!"

It was Em Billopp. Through the few seconds in which this swift drama had passed, she had stood eying Effie and the opposing force like an old general recon-

noitring before he enters the fray. Now she descended, fully armed and ready. Behind her came Ulysses Pinker; they strode down the floor to where Effie stood alone.

"Howdo? Me an' my friend Mr. Pinker here is mighty glad to see you. He'll be pleased if you'll oblige him with a dance, if you ain't too new-fangled fur an ol' time polky. He ain't on to all these here fox trots an' camel walks they talk about, but he's a rip-snortin' leg-shaker o' the ol' kind!"

Effie gave a limp hand to each in turn: she had no reply, however. Against the attack she had stood white, faint but resistant, retreating not one step. But at a word of kindness she gave way. Self-defence had automatically stimulated and given her fortitude; now that Em and Uly took her defence upon their shoulders, the self-support was withdrawn.

"Th-thanks," she murmured wretchedly, "but I—I can't——"

"Yes, you kin—yes, you kin!" Uly waved a long arm at the musicians. "Play up, there! Let's hev a good ol' hell-buster of a polky!"

Protest could be felt, rising, swelling. The young woman at the piano and the young man at the violin cast dubious glances at each other, but a second commanding wave of Uly's arm was not to be disregarded. They struck up.

Uly shot an arm about Effie's waist. Through the room passed glances which seemed in themselves to

rustle, to whisper, to rise to a mighty hum. One fairly heard the glances, loud above the bang and scrape of the instruments.

"Come 'long! Tap a heel, there!" Uly waved high above Effie like a lean, gnarled tree. He was about to lead her forward. . . . The crowd remained aloof, staring coldly. One and another could he heard in muttering dissent.

"Please not!" she pleaded up at him. "I—I don't want to dance! I—I w-want to go home!"

It was the wail of a punished child. Em swept up and covered her. "Git her outside," she whispered to Uly. "Don't let 'em see her cry. It'd tickle that Malmberg woman so, the hull Bad Lands wouldn't be big 'nough to hold her!"

Outside, back within the depths of the car, Effie did not cry. It was all too dreadful for crying. She crumpled in a miserable heap. She shrank, she seemed visibly withering, like some growing plant suddenly exposed to the hot wind.

Within doors, behind her, through the fetid air, teemed the fetid scandal-mongering. Restraint was broken. Glances were no longer covert, the buzz no longer inarticulate. Even out there she caught the sound: salacious, greedy.

"My land! Why, d'you know, them two's settlin' down truer t'each other'n a married couple! Ain't it scand'lous!" cried one who was without sin among them.

The casting of stones had begun.

X

§

VIC and Effie rode home side by side to-night. They sat close for warmth; and silent. Perplexities were harrying him; he had ridden off with Bill for a business talk, and had learned that Minoleum capital was about to raise its interest rate on loans to farmers from 8 to 10 per cent. He would not have admitted even to himself that he cared to spare Effie's anxiety, but, nevertheless, he checked himself from telling her this and resolved not to do so. He was more grimly locked than ever.

At another time she would have felt his depression lying like a cold stone between them. But now she was too preoccupied to feel any but her own. Although pressed close in the flesh, each rode alone, surrounded by his and her own trouble, shut apart by it. The scarf that she had tied over her head blew back; her hair, freshly shampooed that day for the dance and dried in the sweetness of sun and wind, brushed his cheek; but he was insensible to its silk, to its fragrance.

Summer was closing, the night was very cold. It bore upon them ominously, with black warning.

§

They had entered the district of dark buttes and were nearing the ranch before Effie found courage to speak.

"Vic."

"Hh?"

"Sumpthing turrible happened to-night while you was off with Bill."

"Well—what?" he grumbled. "Sumpthing turrible" sounded no alarm through his preoccupation. Some woman's fool business, he supposed—probably the sandwiches had been lost out of a car, or a baby had been sat on while its mother danced. Always getting sat on. Just like a baby, to do a fool thing of that kind.

Effie halted miserably; then she forced herself on. She was quivering.

"They—they didn't—didn't want me. They wouldn't let me dance. They made me go 'way."

Slowly he turned, incredulous. He stared at her through the dark. For the moment this statement of hers registered no meaning in his brain.

"What the devil——" he began.

She stared back at him, white and rigid and cold, through the big accusing dark. Then she answered in a frightened whisper:

"It—it's 'cause we aren't married."

§

For a little his breath had stuck in his throat. When it got loose, his oaths were terrible. Effie tried not to listen.

"A lot they've got to say about it!" the storm beat on. "What's that Herter woman got on you, I'd like to know? Or Minnie Alston and Bi Beady?" For a while furiously, like this; then the oaths again. At length they fell away, and she went on faintly:

"Miss Billopp an' Mr. Pinker was awful nice to me. He ast me to dance but I wouldn't, an' she brung me out to the car an' talked to me awful kind. She says she's *for* us two."

"*Hh!*" She knew by the tone of this that she had made matters even worse; nevertheless, she finished:

"But she says she's got this to say: We done wrong an' we gotta get married."

The oaths now were like lightning that strikes. Ripping, exploding. "I want to know what business it is of anybody's what we do? I made a fair-and-square offer that night you came. I'd have driven you to Minoleum and put you in charge of the minister to find you a job if he could, or help you get back East. Or I'd go fifty-fifty on starving to death on this outfit. You had your choice. Who says I roped in a girl——"

"Nobody says it, Vicky! It's *me* they're getting after—*me!* That's the way—'cause I'm the girl."

In silence, the fact gazed at them. Then he swore again. "I'd thank 'em to let you alone."

"That's jus' what they're doing," she sighed. And around her flowed an ocean of solitude. The previous solitude had been physical and had been measurable by

miles. But now she felt the pressure of that which no miles can reckon.

§

Slowly his wrath expended its strength until it fell into broken mutterings like sultry lightning flashes dying through black storm clouds not yet dissipated. "Women—just what you might expect!" . . . "A lot o' scandal talkers, can't mind their own affairs." . . . "Who says 'marriage'? Bunk invented by an asinine social order for the sake of manufacturing trouble. . . ."

In the midst of this wrath the financial perplexities shot back to his mind. He had resolved not to tell her, but now his harassment blurted itself out, crashing through the resolve as through ice.

"No time to think about rotten village gossip. Got matters of importance to attend to. How do you like this? Interest's going to be raised to ten. Maybe you can tell me how to pay *that*, when I don't know how to pay it at eight!" He turned upon her, peering, strangely desirous of seeing her flinch; as desirous as though it were she who had put up the interest rate. Through the tortuous mazes of the mind his anger, instead of being aimed at the community, had shot off in her direction, and now it was marshalling all its grievances against her.

She stared ahead, despairingly, and made no response.

But he felt a shudder of dread pass through her body close against his own.

§

Silence.
Miles.
More silence.
More miles.

§

And in the midst of physical stillness, each of the two minds was a turmoil. Inside each it was as though hundreds of voices shouted and fought in anger, alarm, reproach, hatred. A mob of thoughts—all violent, all at war.

To Victor Trench, the objections to matrimony were a matter of fundamental principle. On principle, he scorned society and denied its right to interfere in his personal affairs. Also on principle, he scorned women. Wherefore, in that the custom of marriage involved both the opinion of society and a woman, he condemned it at once and finally. He had never before given any thought to his individual case; it needed none, according to his creed. No marriage in his! he had always said, flinging away from society with a turn of the heel; and that had settled it. Rot! Bunk! Rings and bells. A cake. A veil. Orange blossoms. Damn truck. No, sir, not on your life. Fools could get married if they didn't know any better. None o' that in *his*. He'd see himself hung first. He ground his teeth upon it.

What was it for, anyway? To get you. To set a trap for you. Let fools get caught if they wanted to. He knew better than to put his foot into *that* steel catch!

And while the storm of fury beat on within his brain, Effie sat beside him and unhappily followed her own dark ponderings.

§

Dim ominous perplexities were torturing her mind. This thing that civilization knows as its moral code had hitherto played small part in her consciousness. She had been born to, and grown up among, those who were not troublesomely inhibited by it. Among the Whelpley's circle the majority were married, that being the usual method of procedure in this world; but at least two couples were not, and their prestige in the group Effie recalled as unimpaired. The "painless" dentist and his pretty attendant. The Saulters, too—an acrobatic team who "played" the cheaper vaudeville circuit. Everybody knew that Jim Saulter had an honest-to-God wife in Canada, and that Hecla was nothing but his lady-friend. In Mrs. Whelpley's home and among her intimates there had never been a suggestion of criticism of such little irregularities. Effie knew, of course, there were lots of people in the world who disapproved; but she had heard them classed vaguely as "Sunday-school teachers and all like that." They were a different tribe. She had never given any particular attention to their arguments and opinions.

Her outlook on the whole troublesome question had always been one of unconcern; and now, of a sudden, the question had made itself of the utmost concern. It had jumped right up out of nowhere and struck her in the face. It was thrusting itself upon her in the form of attack.

Among her nebulous thoughts was the wonder how all these people knew all about her. They had never seen her but once, or possibly twice in some chance case, when she had shopped in Minoleum. She had lived for weeks in isolation. A horrid sense of invisible wires carrying evil report through space made her shudder.

She had lived in isolation from society, and yet, all at once, she seemed to miss friends. Friends she had never known. She perceived the power of the subconscious. Therein had dwelt potential friends, now departed. Again that ocean of loneliness engulfed her.

Em Billopp's words came back to her. "Now, us two is alone an' we're goin' to talk this thing out, woman to woman, while there ain't no men buttin' in. What I gotta say is this. I'm *for* you two young fools. I al'ays did like Vic Trench, grumpy cuss as he is—took to him when he fust come an' tried to make somethin' outa that Ioway fool's run-down ranch. An' that night you tumbled in, lost an' starvin', I coulda hugged you up like a ewe hugs up a los' lamb. I knowed right off you wa'n't bad—not by perfession. But what I gotta say's this: you two done wrong an' you *gotta git married.*"

Miserably Effie revolved the matter. Why "*gotta*"? What was all the fuss for, anyhow? Punishment and cause were hopelessly muddled in her thoughts. Here she was, living faithfully, toiling day in and day out to perform her duty as she saw it—scrimping in the house to save funds, working over the fowls to add to the scant income, cooking, cleaning, sewing to convert a log shanty into a home—and the community cast her out. The many-branched Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil which, restive and rustling, must forever be discussing all it knows, had flung its branches in her face. They blinded her. She could not see through them, toward the truth; she was conscious only of the densely obscuring, the smothering leaves.

Why "gotta"?

§

A dark hump. Vic grumbling, "Well, here's the hut. . . . Gosh, I'm hungry. You were in such a hurry to get to your old dance, I didn't finish supper." He saw her wince. He wanted to see her wince. . . . He recalled how her eyes had looked big and hot with anticipation when she was doing her hair for the dance.

"There isn't anything but bread," she responded dully. "We gotta save the butter." It was not like Effie. She had always created loaves and fishes.

Drearily they entered the cold house. They kept their coats on while they put things away for the night.

XI

§

LIFE picked itself up and went on, after the manner of Life. For a space the small household suffered sharp reaction from the community's blow; a stunned dread of social contact on Effie's part, sulky defiance on Vic's. She went about in a state of puzzled depression. But social contacts were often weeks apart in that country, and her dread slipped into the semi-forgotten. Both had youth, health, and the tonic of hard work which made for resilience; it was impossible to remain long down. Soon the daily routine was humming like vigorous machinery once more, both indoors and out.

Autumn entered. The glittering days with their hotly flashing noons grew shorter. Each morning it was darker when Vic crept from bed to shiver out to his splash in the living room. Each evening Effie lighted the lamp a trifle earlier. In the middle of the day he worked in his shirt sleeves and paused to mop away the sweat of toil, while she went forth to the chicken house in gingham frock and hatless. But in

the evening they kept up the supper fire for warmth, and talked of making ready for the winter. It was as though they felt an enemy mobilizing afar, making ready to descend.

"I better be chinking up," he said as he walked about the rooms inspecting the walls. Here and there the daubing material—clay mixed with ashes—had fallen from between the logs, and fine-spun cold was threading through.

"I should say so! That stuff's always falling out. I'm walking 'round all day like a hairpin." Effie, with her dustpan, was in fact bent double much of the time; she had soon learned why a log house is the tidy home-maker's *bête noire*.

"Next year, if the sheep do well, I'll cover the whole inside with beaver board—some class! But if I chink up good and tight we can keep warm this winter."

"Oh, Vicky! *Pink* beaver board, can we have?"

"Hh! Pink! Fool colour! Brown, we'll have," he flung out in scorn. But he whistled; and she, within doors, sang. They were looking ahead, they were toiling with a sense of futurity, that surest sign of health in the human mind. They met difficulties, but as powerful contestants whom it was sporting to meet with their own young resistance. The game had its whet. Stimulated by this and by the intoxicating air, Vic now and then broke through the inhibition of his moroseness. To Effie's secret delight he would occasionally

give way to a burst of talk; although he was thinking aloud rather than addressing her.

§

He talked one day of the coyotes.

"The crime wave among those bandits is getting so high they don't stop at anything. Old-timers tell you they only prowl by night—rot. Say you never see 'em in the day only in winter when they're starved. That's a lie. Next thing they'll be walking up to your front door and order you to deliver a leg o' lamb in time for dinner. Got their nerve with 'em. Getting to be the pest of all these states. If the government doesn't do something drastic, we'll all be driven out. Russian wolfhounds do the business—know how to grab a coyote by the throat, and it's all up with the jugular. But how many of us starving guys can buy a five-hundred-dollar dog? All right for your fancy rancher."

"What do the coyotes live on when they can't get a lamb?"

"Anything, from a grasshopper to a deer, from a cactus leaf to a watermelon. They like meat, but they can be vegetarians when they have to be. That's why they're increasing like the deuce, while their wolf cousins are becoming exterminated. They can underbid every other animal. In a pinch, they can live on beetles, choke cherries, buffalo berries, cabbages, dead animals, or birds' eggs. It's said a coyote never starves.

"Don't always eat a lamb after killing it, either. If they've been enjoying high living, they merely suck the blood. Sometimes don't even do that—kill for the sport. Drive their fangs in under the ear—here." He leaned forward suddenly and cut an imaginary gash in her throat with his finger-nail.

She shuddered. It was frightfully graphic. But beneath the shudder lay delight. He was talking to her, although he did not realize it—not to the dog or the scarecrow. Longer than ever before. And about *things*—it was like reading a book. Other men had talked to her about herself, or themselves. The experience of conversation on an impersonal basis was new. It excited her.

Still self-forgetful, he rose and strolled over to a small shelf. From it he took down a plain brown volume and stood rippling over its pages. He paused, read aloud:

"John Van Dyke calls the coyote 'a lean, hungry-looking wretch with all the insolence of a hoodlum and all the shrewdness of a thief. . . . Everything is food that comes to his jaws. . . . The desert tramp.'" He slapped shut the volume. "That's *The Desert*," he said. "I must be reading it again. It'll be the eleventh time."

It was Effie's introduction to the inside of that small, shabby, precious library of the West which Vic had gathered during his first weeks of enthusiasm in the Bad Lands. The outside she had dusted immaculately, and had stood off to gaze at the shelf with admiration,

planning to curtain it in cretonne since there was not enough left of the costume slip. "Books sure do make a room look kinda elegant," she had observed to herself with satisfaction. But their "elegance" was all she had as yet seen in Remington's *Pony Tracks*, in Roosevelt's *Hunting Trips of a Ranchman*, in Talbot's *My People of the Plains*, or in that simple narrative beside which all fictive Western "thrillers" and "grippers" pale to anæmia—the *Journal of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* by that faithful follower, Sergeant Patrick Gass. At last curiosity (always one of her most vigorous and healthy traits) was roused. She had become aware that these books had insides, and insides enlivened by the objective lure of "pickchers." She read them by the latter, with the assistance of such small fraction of their reading matter as she might glean from their pages; her small vocabulary reaped a lean harvest, but a happy one.

§

One night a cold wind swooped across the plain, flinging its arm around the house as though to carry it off in a mad dance. The house swayed, tugged, straining to catch the measure and be off. Effie slid deep into the bed with a shudder and buried her head. She could feel the quilts rise and fall with the rhythm of Vic's heavy relaxed breathing, but the shrieking of the wind kept her awake.

It might have been going on for some time when she first heard the outcry. Her ears had been covered, and the noise of the wind would have screened it. But now at length it reached her: horrified, agonized, all but human. It was the cry of mothers. Her instinct knew that.

"Vic!"

He was sleeping the dead sleep of the utterly weary body. He merely stirred.

"Vic! Wake up! It's the lambs. You gotta go!"

She shook him by the shoulders. He was aware at last, and he sat up in bed for a dazed minute, staring and tousled. Then he sprang to his feet. Blighty's furious barking split their ears, and behind it, around it, was the desperate bleating. The dreadful thing about it was its human quality. She could have stood it, she thought, if it had not sounded so like women.

Wrapping herself in a quilt, she leaned from the window and watched. She could feel her heart hammering as she followed the swift path that Vic's lantern took. A short cut, and he was at the enclosure. Silence; then the gun.

Twenty minutes later he returned. The sheep's outcry had died down; Blighty had given over his frantic defence. In the fold was quiet. Vic's heavy steps, wearily slow, tramped back to the house.

"Any of 'em—kilt?" Effie whispered. She could not bring herself to say it aloud. Still the outcry of the mothers seemed to pierce her ears.

"Two," he ground out. She heard the words between his teeth, and she knew the bitter despair that lay behind them.

"Did you hit him?"

"Hit him! He was probably as far as the arroyo by the time I fired. May have dragged a lamb with him—there's one missing." He was flinging off a boot. It crashed against the wall and fell, *thud*, like fate.

Effie gave no heed to the boot's tone of finality. "Missing?" she cried. "*Dragged it off?* Why, then, we gotta find it!"

"Find it! Find a lamb somewhere between the Mississippi and the Rockies! Dead in the bottom of the arroyo, most likely."

"But maybe it isn't, not yet! Maybe it's alive! We can't let it go, even on the teeniest chanct! We gotta *try!* Vic—put that shoe back on—an' where's mine? We gotta go——"

"Haven't you got any sense? We might as well look for a needle in a haystack, I tell you."

"I *have* got sense! An' I tell *you*, Vic Trench, we're going to go!"

§

They had reached the brink of the arroyo. It lay, a chasm of mystery, at their feet. She had run all the way, panting and gasping forth exclamations, in the all but futile effort to keep up with his indignant strides, and now, as they stopped, she clutched his arm to keep

her balance in the force of the gale swooping beside the ravine. He pulled away his arm, turned upon her.

"Well, are you satisfied? You were bound we'd come—now we're here, what's it for? Pitch dark—how you going to find a lamb, even if it's alive?"

"Vic! We can't go till we hunt!" She gazed miserably about, smitten with the hopelessness of the task. He turned on his heel and was starting back. But again she clutched his arm. "Listen!" She put her finger to her lips and rolled her eyes around as one absurdly does to hear better.

"Listen to *what?* . . . Come *on!* Aren't you cold enough yet?" He shivered, with a "Brrr!"

"But I hear sumpthing, like it's trying to call."

"Dog."

"It's a lamb. I know it. It's down that way." She pointed to the depths of the arroyo farther on, and hurried off along the brink.

"Look out! You'll fall!" he called after, but she paid no heed. He had to follow. He shouted, "You're crazy! Come along back. You'll get killed."

She paused at length, and he caught up where she was hanging perilously over the edge and calling into the depths. She shuddered as her call was picked up by the echo and shouted forth, as tender words are unexpectedly caught and broadcasted by the microphone. It was as though the waste mocked her for her softheartedness—jeered because she troubled about one small creature. A lamb didn't count, it seemed to

scoff—it couldn't fend for itself, it had to take what came and help the fit to survive by offering itself as prey.

"Plenty of rattlesnakes down there, and that's all," Vic growled. "If you're not cold enough yet, I am. Damned if I'm going to hang around here any longer just because——"

"There!" she interrupted. It was a bleat, too distinct to be denied. For a second they stared into the abyss; then she dashed forward.

He had her by the wrist. "You'll break a leg—or your neck."

In the dark she faced him while he held her wrist. "Then *you*'ll go?"

"I tell you it's no good. We'd hunt all night in that jungle of snags and scrub, and the lamb's probably as good as dead already."

She twitched her wrist from his grasp. "If you don't, I do."

With an indignant swing of his lantern he was off, over the edge, driving his heels into the crumbling soil, sliding with it. She could see him searching the ground with his light, could hear him exclaim once, twice. . . . Away down now, he became a mere insect, glimmering off into blackness. . . . Far below, a crashing of branches. . . . Silence.

Had something happened to Vic? What if he should be killed! At the thought, everything seemed suddenly gone hollow to Effie. As though she were a forlorn pea

rattling around in the immense dark pod of the universe. And yet, only a few weeks ago, she had inhabited that pod of life alone, satisfied to do so, unaware of his existence. She had not heard herself rattle.

"Oh, Vi-ic!" she called. No answer.

"Vi-i-i-i-i-i-ic!"

Then, into the blackness, the silence, down the ragged gash of earth with its treacherous foothold and its tangle of rough growth primed to trip and snare, she plunged after him.

§

Vic carried Effie up from the spot where she had fallen, blood dripping from his own wound while he climbed. At her goading, he went back for the lamb, which he had found, badly injured. He dumped it into her outspread arms. It made one feeble inquiry as its soft suffering eyes searched hers; then nestled puppywise, legs hanging like sticks. Blood matted its wool.

"Now we're on the level, I can walk all right," she said, glad that he could not see her face.

Chilled through, they dragged their way home. Her ankle was swelling and turning purple where the fine ligaments were wrenched; he assisted her hobbling steps with his arm that was not bleeding. A snag at the bottom of the arroyo had caught and torn the other. The lamb's legs dangled and jounced between them as they travelled.

Neither spoke. They were both gritting their teeth

against pain. But an hour later found the lamb, which had been surgically treated where the fangs had torn it, and fed upon warm milk, nestled in a bed beside the chimney and smiling with the expression of a gamin who has been rescued and put to bed under a millionaire's eiderdown puff.

In their own bed the pair lay, awake with cold and pain. Vic had bandaged Effie's ankle and his own open wound from his first-aid box, grumbling angrily the while. There was nothing more to do but to lie throbbing with their pangs and wondering just how badly they were hurt and whether their injuries would handicap work.

"Gosh!" he broke silence at length. "All for one damn lamb!"

"The flock's made up of one-damn-lambs."

He winced. There was no gainsaying the principle which she thus asserted and upon which she had acted.

"What's one lamb?" he snorted, however.

"Seven dollars."

If she had been sentimental about it, he might have retorted. But this rendered him impotent—furiously impotent. He had no show against her cool rationality. If she had said fool things as some women would—about "one small life," and "in God's sight," and that bunk. But all she said was, "Seven dollars."

Gradually he was coming to realize this woman, with the absurd terrier nose that wrinkled and poked into things, with the preposterous earrings and rouge and

tawdry finery in which Fate had flung her at him. This woman who said "My lollipop!" and bobbed her hair like a Hottentot and used abominable English. Who was like a child, an absurd, ignorant child, and yet was ages old in wisdom. In a glamorous dream she had walked like a somnambulist into the wilderness, and from it she had instantly roused into an almost terrific clarity of awakeness. Yes, the clarity was her normal outlook, the dream had been but a transient hypnosis produced by the potent hand passes of youth and repressed desires. She was herself now; and, as herself, there was something irrefutable about her; some instinctive adherence to principles of living which she mercilessly applied, without the slightest heed to her own self's most piteous appeal.

Because one lamb was one lamb and must be regarded as an integral part of their small fortune, she would ruthlessly drive herself—and him—out into the night cold, risk their necks in a black abyss, and endure a serious sprain, true to the principle that no fraction of their tiny hoard, no matter how small, must be let slip. It was woman's instinct of conservation fiercely battling to retain what it held. And, now it was once getting hold of this ranch, it was clutching with the grip of a vise.

He turned over with a *flump* of wrath. He was swollen with anger at her; anger because she had dragged herself into a sprain, dragged him into an open wound that might become infected, both of them into a chill

that might become pneumonia. And above all, anger at her because he knew that she was fundamentally right. The result, as it turned out, had perhaps not paid, but the chance had been rightly taken on principle. The successful always have given their all to win. He, in his despondency, would have let the chance of saving the lamb go. It had been too hopeless a quest. Thus, he knew in his secret mind, he had let more than one chance go—because faith had given out. . . . What was faith, anyhow? Dimly, for the first time, the concept of faith as a weapon, rather than an apron string, approached his mind. . . .

Yes, he knew that she had been dead right, and at that moment he hated her for it. It made him yet more angry that he was obliged to draw close to her for warmth. He had to spoon—to spoon up to a woman he hated.

§

The lamb's wounds were freshly bathed and treated, and he was given more warm milk. Morning found his injuries, along with those of Vic and Effie, well on the way to recovery. Fear had passed from his gentle young bosom; he perked all over, wearing his diagonal head-bandage with the swank of a reviving roué. He expanded, swelled to possession of the house. At Vic's every attempt to carry him back to the bedding ground he set up frantic bleats for Effie, whereupon she would rush to him and bury her face in his extremely dirty

wool, and he would be restored to his nest beside the chimney, grinning in guilty triumph.

"Look at him, the sassy! He says, 'Ain't this nuts! I should worry!'" she cried. "We're going to keep him. We gotta name him."

"Charley Ross. Kidnapped," Vic mumbled with a frown, trying to pretend that this was not fun.

Charley Ross it was. Charley, from that hour, became a loquacious, troublesome, and indulged member of the household, nosing his way into every delicacy that Effie prepared, from tomato bisque to tapioca cream; affording her endless amusement and companionship; and causing her to follow about after his excessive untidiness with a dustpan and chidings. She scolded him, spanked him, complained of him; but let Vic merely mutter, "Make fine French chops," and she was brought to passionately defensive endearment.

"He shouldn't be French chops, no, he shouldn't!" she would cry, throwing her arms about his woolly neck.

Vic was morally certain that at such moments Charley leered forth from her embrace and gave him the wink.

XII

§

NATURE is no waster, public opinion to the contrary notwithstanding. What she cannot use for pie, she makes into sauce. Effie's voice was never to win the immortal fame of which she had once dreamed, broadcasted to a listening world; but, crafty housewife that she is, Nature would utilize it, a bit here, a bit there, to serve in her scheme. Day after day it lightened life in the two-room log house where it made its dwelling. And it reached farther. It shot, one morning, into Rachel Darlington's life like a beam into a cellar.

Vic broke his spade and must borrow one, the nearest available being eight miles off. The long arm of co-operation stretches far in the waste places.

"S'pose you want to drive over to Darlingtons'," he grumbled. It was his usual form of invitation. As though she had been nagging to go. Like-a-woman-to-nag-got-to-satisfy-her-somehow attitude.

She had not even heard of them. "Who's Darlingtons? Will they want me?" Effie's first stunned shrinking from human contact had slipped into the partly forgotten, for there was seldom any human con-

tact to remind her of the pain it could inflict; but deep within her mind lay dread.

"Farmers. Brother and sister. It's all right." He scowled at her suggestion of an unpleasant matter.

More and more often he would take her along on errands these days, and then sit silent the whole way, as though he hadn't brought her at all, as though she weren't in the car. . . . She hopped in, chirping. . . . Eight miles. . . .

§

The house was tall and gaunt with a hump, and looked like a distant camel on the desert. As they approached, someone was heard singing; notes fluted to them with startling sweetness through the clear air. There were chords from a piano.

"How on earth did a piano ever get out here?" cried Effie.

The music stopped as if startled when they drove up. A young man came out to meet them, and beyond was a girl's tall slim figure.

"'Lo there! Glad to see you! This Mrs. Trench? We been wanting to meet up with her."

Tom Darlington was sun-smeared and hearty. He led them into a neat living room where a few chairs, a table, and a bureau huddled meekly against the wall as if overawed by the presence of the piano. The girl came forward. She said only a few shy words, but her big dark eyes seemed to devour Effie.

"I been crazy to meet up with you," Rachel Darlington said when the men had gone to the barn. "When Tom said that Mr. Trench had brought an American wife here, I nearly cried, I was so glad. To have any neighbour! And an American!"

"Gee, I don't blame you. The North Pole sure is sociable beside this." Effie settled down comfortably for a feminine heart-to-heart.

"Aren't you happy here?" Rachel asked earnestly.

"Happy?" Effie reflected. There came a quirk in the corner of her mouth, but her eyes were not gay. "Well—I may say I'm partial to parked boulevards an' sunken gardens. I was looking for a metroplus when I come. But I'm like a good ol' jitney—get knocked around over every kind o' rough road, an' wherever I turn up my lights are on an' my horn's a-blowing."

Rachel's face seemed trying to smile, but it was too sad to know how. "You're brave, I can tell that," she said. "And of course you're in love, or you wouldn't have married Mr. Trench."

Effie was silent. Somehow she had never thought this over before. She waited a long time. Then, as if pushing her thoughts away for the present at least, she said lightly: "Well—when it comes to the kinda love that's in the last close-up of a movie—hothouse tempchoor, me-yearning-bosom-thrills kind—they're not wearing that style so much nowadays."

Rachel looked as if Effie's flippancy puzzled her, she

was so very earnest herself. But still she gazed at her new neighbour with those hungry eyes that seemed to devour friendship after long starvation.

Effie glanced at the piano. "Play for me?"

Rachel flushed. "Oh, that you heard was just a little thing I made up. 'Rain on the Plains.' I have to compose because I haven't got much music—only a few pieces. And I don't know anything, really—when you have to learn by correspondence——"

Effie's eyes enlarged. "You learning music *by mail?* Gracious! They learned us at the clinic that canned food hasn't got no vitamins left in it. *I'll* say there can't be many vitamins left in canned music lessons!"

It was a blow. "Oh, aren't the lessons any good?" Rachel cried. "A lady sends them to me, and it's the only way I've got. I've always wanted to go to Chicago or some place to study. Mother thought I was foolish. She said, 'Learning scales don't help milk the cow or make the turkey mash.' But Father was splendid. He always wanted to be a musician himself, and he said it was only because he took hold of a pig's tail and let it twist him that he happened to turn into a farmer. Father ought to have been a composer. He made songs all the time, like I do, only a hundred times better—songs without words—about the things he loved—the plain and the buttes and the clouds—even the Indians and the buffalo herds of old days.

"He said I must carry on what he ought to have done. He scrimped and saved and bought the piano—if only he could have seen it!

"It had to be sent out twenty-five miles by truck, and the truck got stuck on the way and the men were so mad that they drank a lot of whisky and lay down in the sagebrush and slept till next day. Father would keep leaning out of bed and saying, 'Hasn't it got here yet?' but it was too late. He died before it came. It was what he'd been living for, to see me started. And he died for it. We found out afterward that the doctor had told him if he'd have an operation he'd get well; but he spent the money for my piano instead."

§

Again Effie felt that choked sensation that she had felt at hearing about Mrs. Peary's death. The tragedies of this world of isolation had a horror that was different from horrors she had known elsewhere. She fumbled instinctively for relief from her own emotion.

"Look here. Let's see your exercises. I'm no Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler, but I demonstrated in the Five an' Ten, an' maybe I could show you sumpthing."

"Oh! Could you? Would you? Truly? Why—that's too good to—to happen." Rachel's judgment of life had been moulded by crops that failed to head, hens that refused to lay, turkeys that wouldn't fatten, and cows that went dry. She gazed anxiously at the other,

as though some form of disappointment must lurk within the promise.

But the practical Effie proceeded to take action at once.

"Sit down," she said severely, "an' I'll stand behind you. Now—lemme see how you hold your hands. That wrist's altogether too high. Like this. . . ."

The lesson was in full swing when the men returned. It was to be followed by many, until pupil so far outstripped teacher that they were abandoned. Effie's experience as demonstrator, during which she had clanged forth, "The band's come out to meet me in the old home town!" and wailed, "I sit alone with silvered hair," was hardly adequate as a culture in which to breed genius. But someone taught Milton to spell cat, rat, and bat. Certain rudimentary laws of the keyboard were conveyed, after a fashion, to Rachel, helping her better to interpret her mail lessons. There were times when Effie, approaching the tall humped house that reared itself hideously among desolate buttes and hearing the chords of that piano caught up and tossed like chimes in a solitude, wondered whether great fame awaited her friend. Maybe the day would come when, although not famous herself, her heart would cry exultantly that she had given "Darlington" her first lesson.

§

Driving home, she reflected upon the warmth of Rachel's welcome to her. The Darlingtons, she real-

ized, were outside the circle of gossip. They had not heard. . . . She wondered if she ought to tell Rachel? Effie's mind was a tangle when she thought upon this strange problem that the community had roused to consciousness within her. So she decided not to think about it any more. It was uncomfortable, because mystifying. Inwardly she changed the subject to one more cheerful.

"Say, if you kill that ol' hen that isn't any good for laying, I'll make dumplings," she proposed to Vic.

XIII

§

THE sharp foretaste of winter had passed, and a long Indian summer entered, serene as an unworried soul awaiting death. The wind withdrew; that frantic wind of the plains that seldom rests, that has driven lonely women to a madness like its own. But now it ceased. Autumn lay rich and mellow as ripe fruit.

The grass had dried, and miles of cottonwood trees along the river were brown, their autumn brilliance showing only in occasional sparks among the embers of the year. But in hidden places flashed the fire of buffalo berries, and shrubs hung out bloody pennants. A few late flowers lingered—purple thistles, fat silky pompons; asters of briskly efficient charm; goldenrod, brazen, polished blotches of it like great platters throwing off light.

§

At length, to her own astonishment, Effic was on a sheep-wagon trip. She had never ceased to beg for permission to go, but she had long ceased to expect it.

"Vicky, take the wagon an' lemme go 'long make you hot muffuns," she would propose.

"Hh! What's the good o' muffins?" he would rumble wrathfully while buttering his fifth.

She had learned to give herself the wink. Many a wife has solved her domestic difficulties by this art. She would stoop to the stove behind him, drawing out the second tin of steaming golden-brown tempters, and cast a sly glance from the tail of her eye at that self who was her only confidante.

But surprise dazed her when, striding in for supper one evening, he announced:

"Going to take the sheep off. Few days. Dave Olefsky'll have an eye out for things here. Pack up. We'll start early."

"Vicky! *To-morrow?*"

"Well, it doesn't take you a week to pack all your ball dresses, does it?"

"Vick-k-k-ky!" She gave vent to her delight in a prolonged squeal, and flew to make ready the wagon's cuisine.

§

There followed days that opened a new world. Out in space, Effie found fresh vistas. It would seem that she must already have known the solitude, in her lonely dwelling; but a house is in itself a barrier that shuts off infinity. Now they slept not even in the bunk; they rolled in blankets, and, sturdy young gipsies that they

were, lay on the curly brown grass, staring at stars that dotted their ceiling.

"Vicky, play I'm a gipsy queen. Fortune! Tell your fortune, nice good-look' gent'man!" She threw his red neckerchief over her head, thrust her arms akimbo, and, striking a posture of exquisite mimicry, seized his palm.

"Hh! Bunk! Don't want to know my fortune!"

"Vicky, you do," she calmly persisted. "Nice good-look' gent'man, you beware girl with blue eyes, light hair!" She grabbed his palm as it escaped. "She get you. Beware. She make you eat muffuns an' biscuts, all nice an' hot——"

"Hh! Got to get in those stragglers. Let go! Here, Blighty!"

So, snorting, gruffing, he would hurry back to the flock while Effie smiled a wise little smile that she had learned, and proceeded to sift flour for more of the despised muffins. She was never weary of baking in the fascinating oven. Tight as a Pullman car the wagon was packed, and it was an endless delight to prepare meals, to tidy, to rearrange in the snug compactness.

Camp life thrilled her. To wake in the night and find nothing between her and the heavens; to lie staring up at stars that wheeled, stars that fluttered like moths, stars that shone still as truth; to listen to the silence—now a wee scurry would cross it, like a fine line drawn quickly across a blank sheet—the tiny terror of the pursued; then the stealthy stalking of theft. To smell

the sagebrush, tingling, salty, more tonic than any sweetness. . . .

Thus she would lie for an hour or more, too happy to go back to sleep. Beside her the man lay. His fantastic length, his dark, boldly etched face, his black hair with the crest like that of a strange bird. . . . Even in sleep the face was sombre, inscrutable—the face of the man to whom she had given her all and whom she would never wholly know. Often the thought came to her that he was like the land itself—this taciturn land that bided silently, that would never reply.

In the night the sheep looked soft and dark upon the ground where they slept. They rested in quiet; no coyotes disturbed them here, and they trusted implicitly in Blighty's eye and ear, which seemed to know no slumber. The world was so still that Effie could hear them sigh and stir like children in their close-huddled sleep. They nosed each other, drew close for creature comfort, stretched their awkward wool-bundled legs that tapered so delicately to tip-toed feet. They readjusted their stubby tails, placing them more comfortably —perhaps, thought Effie, your tail may go to sleep if you're a sheep, the way your arm or leg goes to sleep if you're a human. Their odour hung in the air; the ammoniacal odour that had greeted her that first night. . . . That first night. . . . Nothing can conjure up a memory as can an odour.

§

So for four days they camped some miles from home, the sheep feeding on fresh pasture while Vic and Blighty guarded them. The horse, browsing, lazily awaited orders to take the wagon back. The country here was similar to that surrounding the house; in fact, some of the same buttes were visible, but from this new angle they took on new aspect, as does life.

"I never thought how tall that blue one is," Effie said. "I'll name it the Woolworth."

Already she had Grant's Tomb and the "Pulc Libry," the Zoo Zebra, the Pudding Mould, the Whale, the Hipp'ot'mus, and the Enchanted Cottage. The last named wore a suggestion of sheltering roof, of low welcoming doorway. She loved it best, yet she chose never to approach it; some instinct warned her that, upon approach, enchantments flee.

On the last night they had moved to a spot beside the river. They halted close to a solitary farmer's land. His meagre crop had yielded one stack; he was burning it, the remains left from his poor little threshing. Its lonely, sombre fire shone like a jewel against the velvet folds of the night.

Effie fell asleep watching the fire glow just beyond the wagon. As she grew drowsy, she caught it through drooping lids; the fire seemed now flinging itself like arms to the sky, now falling away to a dull spark. . . . Rising, sinking. . . . Her lids fell. . . .

She waked with a sense of being startled and not knowing what had startled her. She sat up; Vic was

jumping from his bed on the ground beside her. The sharpness of smoke was stinging her nostrils.

"Wake up!" he was shouting. "The pails!" The wagon was on fire.

§

A wind had sprung up and carried some flaming straws from the stack to the wagon where they had dropped upon the canvas roof.

Vic's first move was to make a dash for the pails which hung within the burning wagon. The canvas roof was flaming blithely: he ran to the rear entrance, took a quick survey of the situation, then, ducking, made a dash for the three pails. Already bits of fire were falling from the roof, alighting like splendid butterflies upon the treasured furnishings of the wagon home. One fell upon his shoulder; he was brushing it off as he emerged, the pails on his arms.

"Take the small one, I'll take the others."

Effie had pulled her wits together, and now the two fell to work, running down to the river, puffing back to the wagon. They hurried desperately, filling, carrying, spilling water in their haste, hurling the remainder at the flames.

"You climb up where you can reach good, an' I'll pass 'em to you," Effie shouted as she came up from the river a fourth time, bending sidewise with her load.

He scrambled through the smoke, black and blinding,

and stood on the wagon seat where he might throw the water to better advantage.

"Oo-oo-oop! Take it, quick!" Effie's face purpled, the smoke strangled her. Pressing her eyes and mouth tight shut, averting her face, holding her breath, she would lift a full pail to him. . . . Swash, slop. . . . Almost overturned—saved! He reached down, he had it.

Swisssssssh! Another pail. Another furious hiss of the resistant fire. Another pail. Another hiss.

"Look out. I've got to jump."

He could barely see through the smoke. He jumped to the ground. Together, they backed away.

"Vicky, did yuh burn yuh?"

"Hh! Nh!" he scorned, secretly nursing a damaged hand. "No use o' more water. It's dying down now."

They were panting, sweating, exhausted. Their eyes smarted and wept from the smoke, they wiped their grimy faces.

They watched the fire sink as dawn broke. At last it was out entirely; the final spark died, the smoke fluttered like breath and was done. Its acrid smell stung their nostrils.

Slowly walking back to the remains, they made examination. The wagon box and wheels were left; repairs would make it possible to use them. But they were small comfort to Effie; only the skeleton of a beloved and vanished home. The walls and roof of the sheltering tarp, the wee shelves and cupboards and

bunk and table and furnishings of her happy playhouse had been gulped by the gourmand.

"How much, Vicky?"

"Hundred dollars, maybe."

They stood silent. Losses had pursued him; here was another, here again a hateful blow from Fate. And yet somehow he did not feel as he had felt months before, when his ewes died and his lambs were snatched. Then, he had wanted to chuck everything—to chuck life itself —but now——

"Oh, well, don't need the wagon any more this year, and by next summer I can fix her up in great shape." He felt a queer exultation swell. It was like punching at somebody who punched back, hard, but you merely squared yourself and made ready to punch again.

Effie said, "Yes, that'll be grand. An' I'll make curtains."

Dawn flushed up over the edge of the plain, the clouds went rosy. The river was hidden by its own mist, a long flowing veil that swept concealingly like a woman's scarf. Tearing aside the veil with prying, lustful fingers, the day assaulted it.

In the glow of dawn they perched on the fire-stained wagon-box, among the smelly ashes, and swung their heels over its side. And their spirits rose as phœnixes. They looked at each other. His eyes burned into hers, he leaned nearer; it came to her, and not without passion, that at last she was to know his kiss. . . .

The moment passed, he drew back, there had been no

physical contact. But some interpenetration had taken place. She felt the pressure of a closeness; their loss had drawn them together. It was as though the shedding of even this minor material possession had to a slight degree released their spirits, had removed at least one barrier—one of the multitudinous *things* which are stones in the wall that separate us in material life.

XIV

§

SOMETIMES, in driving at a distance from home, Vic and Effie would pass deserted farms of other ex-service men who had undertaken to make a fresh start in the wilderness. Not one remained in these parts except Vic. A rude wooden house, hardly more than a woodshed, would cower in the midst of barren acres; approaching, they would find that the building was devoid of window panes, stray cattle having broken through. They would see through the house as through a ghost. Once, when the setting sun was behind the house, the light turned its windows into the staring eyes of the insane.

"That's where Hemp tried to make a go of it," Vic would say. Or, "Allan stuck it out as long as he could. Got drunk and quit." Driving past, Effie would look back at the house standing like a wraith where death reigned, and she would shudder.

Only once did they find an occupant in any of the soldiers' shacks. This was many miles away. They came upon a one-room house painted orange—a frantic, screaming colour that seemed ominous of disaster. In

the midst of gray desolation this violent note of colour seemed uttering a shriek for succour.

An old woman came to the door, wiping her hands on her calico wrapper.

"My lan'!" she exclaimed upon seeing visitors; then, in the most unexpected way, she burst out weeping.

Effie jumped from the car. "There, there!" she crooned, gathering the old woman into her arms. "It's all right, there, it's all right." She didn't in the least know whether it was all right, but she felt a desperate impulse to comfort.

"Oh, do you know anything about him?" the woman sobbed.

"Who d'you mean? Is Dick Otis your son?" Vic asked.

She nodded.

"Don't you know where he is?"

She shook her head.

"Why, he left long ago for California."

"He never wrote to me he was leavin'. Course, he didn't know I was comin'," the woman explained. "He wrote to me in May that he was gettin' along, an' he hoped he'd have a crop by next year. He didn't wanta tell me how bad things was. But I smelt a mouse. So I up an' packed. I live in Nebrasky. An' I come along, to see if I couldn't help him. I wanted to s'prise him. I was thinkin' I could make him them corn cakes he used to like with molasses. An' when I got here he'd went. No clo'se nor nothin'. Moved on."

The old woman sank in a sobbing heap and threw her calico wrapper over her face to hide her terrible wrenched mouth, all square, and her flood of tears. Effie had never before seen an old person cry, and she found it horrible.

They helped Mrs. Otis pack her small belongings, and took them, along with her, in the car. She had money enough to return home, and now she decided that it was no use waiting for Dick. She stayed with Vic and Effie overnight, and the next day he drove her to the train.

Another tragedy among the ex-service pioneers. It had been one after another, Vic said; tragedy after tragedy.

"Peary and I were the last in our district, and now Peary's gone," he would repeat. "One of the forms of killing that war does after the killing's supposed to be over. Live bunch they were around here, too! Some of 'em were good stuff—not all. But the best of 'em tried like the devil to come back."

And he, like Effie, would gaze back at the wraith of a dead house.

One day he told her about Dick Otis. Dick had got it into his head that another man wanted to steal his land and had killed him. Perhaps he had been insane when he committed murder on such a preposterous assumption—it would seem so. But he had appeared sane in other ways, and the slaying had been ugly, indecent; he had killed with a rusty knife while the other

lay asleep in his bunk. And then Dick had fled with the other's small cash—nobody knew where he was. He was cowering from the law somewhere, like an animal—on the Coast, perhaps, or in Mexico.

"I let his mother think he'd just moved on," Vic muttered.

§

This season, like several preceding it, had been one of devastating drought. Many experienced farmers had been unable to hold on, and these A. E. F. boys, few of whom had ever lived on a farm, were helpless against ruinous conditions. They had no reserve of either funds or knowledge to tide them over. Above all, they were Americans.

The European peasants were different. They suffered, but somehow the most of them held on. A few even prospered. The most thriving family near by were the Olefskys; David, the oldest boy, helped Vic out occasionally, and Effie came to know the household.

It was as cheerful as the Darlington home had been despondent. It consisted of a mother and father, four boys, seven girls, eight hens, two ducks, a widowed goose, two cats, and a dog. Every member of the family talked, laughed, cackled, quacked, hissed, mewed, or barked at once to welcome the visitors, and jovial smiles beamed so abundantly that Effie was dazzled, and came away with the impression that goose, hens, dog, and cats had all been smiling at her.

"Bride! We want see bride! We want say good luck, long life, lotta bebby!" Mrs. Olefsky burst out warmly.

Mr. Olefsky looked Effie over critically. "Good look," he conceded. But a more important question was at stake. "Work field? Plough? Herd sheep?' he demanded of Vic, as if inquiring into the points of an animal.

Vic shrugged. "Do that myself."

"Huh!" Olefsky shook his head at American prejudice. "Good woman work field. Help man." He shook his head defensively, and his eyes retreated. For the moment they became wolfish, halting with a defiant glance, as though taking a stand against attack. At that instant this Polish peasant was centuries of woman-crushing tradition defying modern emancipation. He was ages of sex tyranny battling against a new age, a new nation of sex equality.

But Mrs. Olefsky cherished no grudge against the ages and land which had placed the yoke upon her neck or against the husband who had armed her with a pitchfork and sent her out to the haystack.

"Strong—me!" she said proudly, and bared her right arm. "Can beat Olefsky pitch hay!" She displayed her biceps and laughed while her spouse clamped his hand over the muscle to show its rocklike resistance.

"Her an' me work—get wheat," the Pole said. He pointed to the stacks. There they crouched, tawny, leonine, like sphinxes upon the surface of a vast earth;

they were the chaff from which a fat young crop had been harvested.

"Gosh! A crop like that, this year!" Vic exclaimed. "Everybody else lost to the grasshoppers if they managed to pull through the drought. Olefsky, they say you'd have a crop if the last day had come and the earth was drying up." The Pole grinned wisely.

§

Mrs. Olefsky disappeared in the kitchen, and returned with plates upon which gleamed the icy coral of ripe watermelon slices. The fruit was dripping with juice, and luscious, fresh from her garden.

"How d'you keep it from the rabbits?" Effie cried.

"Ahhh!" Mrs. Olefsky threw back her head and laughed, exposing the toothlessness of the middle-aged European peasant. "Me watch. Shoot rabbit. Pot!"

"There's thrift!" Vic regarded it. "Raises the melons—then, she uses 'em as bait, catches the rabbits when they come to rob her, and turns the robbers into a stew. We Americans don't know what thrift means. We'd lose both the melons and the rabbits—she gets 'em both."

From cellar to garret Effie saw what thrift meant to this Polish woman. Below, on dark shelves, were stored dozens upon dozens of glass sealers filled from her own products—string beans, beets, red and yellow tomatoes that she had raised herself. Laborious irrigation had

achieved a rich vegetable garden. She had utilized the wild fruits as well. Sand-plum jelly in glasses caught a stray beam like wine; choke-cherry preserves were ranged temptingly.

At the outside cellar door Effie came upon a surprise.

"My gracious! A spinning wheel!"

There, like a glimpse of the Old World, the wheel sat in a strip of sunlight, where the cool cellar could breathe upon the spinner while she worked.

"Yah. Spin goat," explained Mrs. Olefsky, and, as though to demonstrate her own profitable presence, the goat thrust her nose in at the door.

"You *spin* the nanny?" breathed the astonished Effie.

"Yah. Sure. Not fine like sheep. But strong. Children stockin's. Go school winter. Warm."

She held up the coarse warm yarn spun from the goat's hair, and handed Effie a heavy stocking in process of knitting.

"Girl goat, get milk," Mrs. Olefsky added. "Pull wagon, too—pull baby."

"One nanny goat—an' she uses its milk to drink, makes it pull the baby-wagon, an' spins its hair into yarn. . . . Come 'long, Vicky. She'll be clapping me into a sealer for an extra fine peach, an' if she fin's out what a goat you are, she'll sure shear you an' knit you into a muffler."

But although she joked, Effie's thinking machine was inarticulately at work. What did it mean, that these

ignorant Europeans prospered while far more intelligent Americans, our own ex-service men, failed? Surely there must be a way for them as well. Was their lack that of honest desire? Of a unison with the meaning of things?

XV

§

BEFORE winter should set in for good, Vic decided to take the sheep off for one last feeding-up. He would go back toward the mountains, where, in nooks of the foothills, were succulent concealments.

He travelled in the wagon without tarp or furnishings. Now he must camp on the ground, no matter what the weather. It turned out to be the perfection of autumn, with asters and thistles purpling like shadows in the folds of every coulee, with the yellow of goldenrod like sudden flashlights thrown down the bleakest arroyo side. The plain was seared, but where the first hills started to climb one came on green as sharp-whetted as in spring.

Making headquarters in his rough camp, spending the days in lazily following the band with Blighty, reading, thinking, planning for the future, Vic found himself strangely content. What the devil made him feel that unfamiliar deep-down satisfaction? he wondered. A few months before, off alone like this with the band, he had nearly gone crazy. Books had failed him, thought had slipped into black brooding, he had sunk to the

stone-piling of the ignorant herder—trudging, carrying, building—to no purpose—mere blind, futile activity, the instinctive struggle to ward off madness. And that in turn had failed, and he had slunk into an inertia of despair. . . . And then the dark resolve. . . .

But now he was possessed of some strange inner rest. As though he had always been searching for something, and at last he had found it, and he could draw a deep breath and settle down. Settle down—yes, that was it—a feeling of being here, in life, for a reason, and permanently. . . . This feeling made everything look different. Things appeared worth undertaking, as if undertaking would *get* somewhere. . . .

On the earlier summer trip he had carried along Proctor's *Half Hours with the Telescope* and had left it forgotten on the floor of the wagon. Now he read a chapter each afternoon, then spent the evening lying on the bare ground, hands clasped under his head, eyes and mind journeying over the firmament.

"Say, the Winged Horse! G't ap there, Pegasus! And the Harp—gosh, but it's shining to-night! Pretty near hear it twang. Celestial lyre that Orpheus played to charm the wild beasts of the forest. Wish he'd get busy and charm some bears, coyotes, and mountain lions. Might get a commission from the United States Government to rid the stock-raising country of pests."

The streaming Milky Way poured down the sky, Vega shone pallidly blue, the Swan spread her lovely wings and swam in languid beauty upon the lake of the

heavens. Hour after hour Vic lay and watched them all, swimming off himself in imagination, losing his earth sense as he relaxed and lay upon the immensity of space.

Yes, it was worth while now, studying astronomy. He meant to get more books and follow the stars month by month. "Be great in the winter—Capella—made of the same stuff as the sun but a hundred times brighter—holy Moses, some star, that! Book says the light we're looking at now left there by through express forty years ago. So if Capella's power plant should get out of commission, we wouldn't miss her from the sky for another forty years, I s'pose! . . . And I want to get a line on Betelgeux. Say, looks exactly like a topaz. Two hundred and fifteen million miles across it. . . . I'm going to keep this up all the twelve months, till I get to know every one of those hell-buster stars."

Thus he looked ahead, laid plans. He would read more history, too, this coming winter—especially the development of the West. Later, he would make a thorough study of the history of France. He had liked France. . . . Donkey, bird cage in the sun against a house's gray wall, broad blue shoulders swaying to the scythe's rhythm. . . .

The years to come stretched broad and long and shining as a sunlit road. Into the future. The future! What a land it would be to explore!

§

The sheep were doing excellently. There had been no losses of late from sickness, coyotes, or accident, there was a general looking-up. Yes, by another year he would be on his feet. Watch the woollies now, with their fat sides sticking out! And those lambs, all pepped up with fresh feed and fall weather!

He set about getting his supper from the wagon, warming up the baked beans that Effie had stowed there, slicing the bread that she had taught herself to make. Great, this thing of getting off alone—no woman hanging round—all by his lonesome. Didn't know when he'd enjoyed a week so much. Women were always wanting to know something. Or they talked to you at breakfast. Gosh, but a man could live like a prince, even camping out, so long as he had it to himself!

So the strangely tangled fibres of consciousness knotted within his mind. The desire for the woman, the desire to be free. The fact of Effie was his sole incentive to go on living; only because she had entered his life had he put away its contemplated ending. In these weeks she had woven herself inextricably into the very fabric of his existence. Without her, there had been no future, no looking forward into the outworking of a design. With her, he was seeing ahead, desiring to persist.

And yet, as always, his craving for solitude was insistent. The shackles that every companionship imposes chafed his self-centred assertiveness. All his life he had been angrily jerking loose from every social bond.

He knew no concession, no conformity, no adjustment. He liked being off where he wasn't expected to talk to anybody. And all the time, although he was entirely unaware of the fact, the only reason he was enjoying himself alone was that Effie was *there*—that he could return to her—that she "was around." She was something to "have around."

§

Effie no longer felt any fear in staying alone. She took advantage of Vic's absence to clean house and to make a new cushion for his big chair. She spanked it into shape. "He sure will like it. But he won't say so. He'll scowl an' say, 'What's that damn thing?'"

She gazed upon the cushion, red and green and gay. Suddenly she laid her cheek against it. Once, on just such an impulse, she had laid her cheek against his, had felt its male harshness, and a small delicious shudder had shivered through her. He had said, "What's *that* for?" and had jerked away.

Effie strolled to the open door. The golden day rang out to her and she broke into song, pouring forth a torrent of notes into lonely space, broadcasting to the sunshine, to the wild flowers, to the great impassive buttes, to little scurrying creatures.

"Hello, there! Say, that's a gran' piece you're singin'!"

Effie's own song had deafened her to the sound of a

clattering, rusty, dusty old car which sprang from nowhere, bearing a waving, shouting pair—Em Billopp and Ulysses Pinker.

"Mornin'! Say, you're lookin' fine an' dandy!" Uly's crooked old face beamed down upon Effie, while Em gathered the small form into her huge masculine embrace.

Effie, long shut off from all but a few neighbours, gazed upon the two friends in flooding joy. For a moment she could only glow; then, "Oh, you two old *darlings!*" she cried, and took them both into one encircling hug.

§

When, tearful and laughing, she held them off and looked tham over lovingly, she discovered that their appearance was most unusual. Miss Billopp no longer wore calico, but a silk gown of mail-order smartness—short, displaying columnar strength of limb; tightly fitted, revealing a peculiarly unfeminine architectural structure; and violently green of hue. Her hat resounded with floral chorus; her hands were gloved. Uly, also, was painfully restrained by his attire, a new black suit with high collar and plaid scarf imprisoning the long neck where erstwhile a red bandana had easily reposed; a fedora atop the head which had known only the broad brim of the plainsman. Their costumes crackled with newness, and were evidently at once their pride and their distress.

"Say, but you're some punkuns!" Effie declared. "You look like you was going to a wedding!"

Uly turned solemn. "That's jus' what we are!"

"Uly Pinker, you run 'long an' 'tend to the car," Miss Billopp instructed. "I got sumpthin' to say to this here young woman." And she led Effie in for a talk.

§

"Uly an' me's goin' to Minoleum to git married," she announced.

Effie jumped from her chair. "You *are?*" She gave the old woman another hug. "You two silly ol' darlings! For the love o' Pete, I hope you live long an' be happy!"

"Wal, you see Uly's been tryin' to ast me the las' twenty or thirty years. 'Twas knowed I kep' off the men—so Uly, he was scared off when he heard as how I says I'd treat a man like I'd treat a polecat at the chicken roost if one dared git soft. He never was scared o' nothin' else, from cattle on a stampede to Cheyennes on the warpath, but he was scared to propose to me."

"You ol' flirt."

"No, I ain't never been no flirt, but seein's how I'd issued that polecat ultymatum, I never did know how to un-issue it, though I never meant it to apply to Uly none o' the time."

"An' you're on your way now?"

"Yeh. We're goin' to be did soon's we git to town, then we'll hev a gran' dinner an' take the train. We're goin' to visit friends an' travel all winter. A reg'lar honeymoon tower," Em concluded with an air.

"I'll say it's like a piece in a book," Effie murmured in sympathetic delight. "You ol' lovers, getting together after years o' heart yearnings an' throbs o' pain an' bliss!" She was not sure what these emotions were, but she felt that they must be appropriate.

"Yes, it sure is a tender hour," Em agreed. "An' we're comin' back to Uly's outfit nex' summer, an' goin' to run it fur a dude ranch. It's a turrible come-down fur a man what was onct the bes' shot between the Pap an' the Whisky Straight rivers, but he's gotta make a livin'."

Without pausing to explain the full significance of Uly's tragic decline, Em went on, "An' it was you brought all this to pass!"

"Me? How?"

"Wal, Uly an' me got to talkin' 'bout you an' Vic, an' the subject o' marriage, an' that led up. I says as how I b'lieved it's the only way to git 'long, considerin' the world ain't angels, but folks. They know they ain't angels, too, an' that's why they fix it to lasso 'em-selves with the holy bond fur lariat. 'Wal,' says Uly, 'seein' as how you think such a lot o' the holy bond, what's the matter with us lassoin' ourselves, an' round-in' up ourselves in the same corral?'"

Miss Billopp paused, eying the other. A dark flush

had mounted Effie's face at the painful reminder; she was silent.

"Now, what we come fur," Em went on, pressing down her words, "is to invite you an' Vic Trench to come 'long with us an' we'll all hev a double weddin' an' celebrate together!"

Effie was silent for a long time. Then, "Thank you, but we couldn't accept—not to-day," she murmured.

"Why not?"

"Why, 'cause Vic—'cause he's—he's off—with the sheep. Way back to—the foothills."

§

As they drove on to Minoleum Em and Uly were less ebullient than before, albeit nuptial bliss drew nearer with every mile.

"Wal, I'll be blamed if I wouldn't 'a' made him marry her," Uly asserted gravely, "if he hadn't 'a' been too fur off to git at him."

Em shook her head. "I dunno if he ever will. He's that sot agin every law-abidin' idee. But we've did our part, tryin'."

"Does the girl want to?"

"I can't make out. She don't know nothin' 'bout morals—she never was raised. She's a come-by-chanct, an' way I size her up, she's like them lambs the breeder throws out at lambin' time—let 'em trot 'long with the band if they kin, an' if they can't, let 'em lay down an' wait fur the buzzards. An' she skips 'long, an' takes

life the way it comes, an' she looks kinda dazed if you talk morals to her. She ain't bad, an' she ain't good, 'cordin' to mos' folks' idees. She's jus' natural-like."

Em fell into reflection. At length she observed, "It's queer, how much more them two is upholdin' the holy bond what they're outwardly rejectin', than a lot o' folks what's reelly rejectin' the holy bond what they pretend to be upholdin'."

The subtleties of the problem were proving too difficult. A minister offers a simple and safe solution, one that spares profound sociological study; and Em abandoned herself to the easier way. Uly let go the wheel for a moment to clasp her hard old palm. They were setting out on their short journey together like young lovers, facing blithely whatever was to be, even the humiliating prospect of a dude ranch.

This type of institution is at once the salvation and the degradation of many a one-time hero of the West. The romance of the plains is dead; wealth has vanished; but an old rancher may still avoid bankruptcy if he will stoop to install hot and cold baths, a fancy vegetable garden, a city cook, and "horses for the use of guests" —these being of senile mildness. The guests from the East will take snapshots of each other astride these aged and spiritless steeds, and display the pictures when they return home, explaining that "this was a devilish bucker—took all my nerve to stick on, but I gave the brute a lesson!"

Effete degeneration of this sort faced Ulysses Pinker

on the famous old One Bar One. Its history read like an epic of daring deeds. And now his old age was to be spent beside tenderfoot tourists, "wrangling dudes" instead of proud cattle, while his wife catered to dudish appetites. But she *was* his wife at last, after more than a quarter century of longing; together they faced the future.

§

Effie stood alone once more, watching the bridal couple fade upon the horizon. She did not sing now.

"I'm glad Vic wasn't here, 'cause he'd 'a' been turrible mad at 'em for telling him to marry me. He won't never do it."

She watched a mother gopher steal up anxiously and snatch a breadcrust left by the chickens. The animal was intent upon providing for her family. She never failed them. Ceaselessly diligent in caring for them, risking every danger to snatch the crust, thankful for supply, she hastened back, ready for the next duty. . . .

"Gee, but everything's queer," thought Effie. "Vic was telling me them gophers stick to one mate through thick an' thin. An' they don't wear no wedding ring! An' there's that Mrs. Plimpton in Minoleum, they say she had the finest wedding ever happened in that town, cake come all the way from St. Paul with a bridal couple on top; an' now it's two years since, an' she's running with the druggist. *I'll* say everything's queer!"

She gazed wistfully into space, as though seeking an

answer. "I wonder. Our crowd, we never bothered about the painless dentist an' his girl, nor about them acrobats. They was as good as the rest of us. I wonder—does it make all the diffrunce, like these people seem to think? It's queer. . . . But it feels awful lonesome."

With a sigh she went in and heated water for washing the dishes. Morality and immorality, as the world regards them, were a hopeless muddle to her; but she had been taught, and with a smart taste of the whip, the relation between cause and effect. The Community had seen to that.

§

The Northern summer grew lean with age and prepared to depart. The noons still flushed hotly blue, like a Montana sapphire, but the nights were long and cold. Now the man and the woman scooped up their bodies, closely fitted together for warmth, under heavy cold bedding. Sleep became restless because of inadequate warmth. The wool which the ranch produced had always been sold; the quilts were filled with cotton, and they lay like slabs.

More and more often now the long wail severed the night's silence. It chilled Effie even more than the thin, blade-like air. She would lie awake, every muscle rigid, her tight body curved into that of the man, listening to the cry's familiar rise, awaiting its shrill horrific climax. After it, she would sometimes not sleep for

hours. She would lie listening for its return, for a disturbance among the sheep. Vic shut them into the enclosure every night, and Blighty was on duty to give warning. But the danger was increasing. What if a lamb should be snatched from its mother? She was always thinking nowadays of how the ewes must feel. She could not keep her mind away from the ewes.

XVI

§

VIC and Effie were driving home one evening through a cold fall rain, when they saw a mysterious light travelling in the same direction as their car. It was faint; it would vanish, then reappear, weak but eager, as though someone were trying to signal. But Vic's shouting and searching proved of no avail, and, the light having disappeared entirely, they drove on home.

It was almost midnight before they finished their delayed chores and were ready for bed. As Effie closed a window she cried out:

"There's that light again! Out there past the chickun house!"

The rain was blinding by now, and Vic put on his storm coat, took the lantern, and went forth. She watched breathlessly. . . . The lantern, swaying, dimming. . . . The other light, a flicker. . . . Both flashing, both vanishing, swallowed by the night and the storm. . . . Through the rudely matched floor the wind swept in, shuddering gusts of presaged winter. . . . All black. . . . Vic's voice——

"Say, where's the door? Open it!"

She ran to it. Vic was accompanied by a slightly built man in a traveller's light suit which was soaked through. He was so thin and so wet that he reminded Effie of an animal whose fur has been drenched until it clings.

"Come on in," Vic was saying, "I'll build up the fire and she'll get you supper."

"Good-evening. My name is Keith Hamlin." As the stranger spoke to Effie, his hand went out and his face lighted with a smile which seemed to take the place of a fire in cheering the room. It gave her an odd feeling that she was the guest and he a cordial host welcoming her.

"Your husband has been good enough to take care of my horse, which has gone lame. I was signalling with my bull's-eye flash. Do you think you can put me up —anyway at all—for the night?" His manner was appealing and yet confident, as though he said, "I know I'm making you a lot of trouble, but I see you're the sort that would never forgive me if I didn't let you help."

"Sure. If you can get along with what we got." She knew instinctively that he belonged to a different world, but his smile banished her shyness.

As he took off his drenched cap, it struck Effie that he was mostly forehead. The head diminished delicately toward a slender neck and a small, strong chin. A boyish crop of fine, wavy gold hair surmounted his big brow; the features were physically fragile, spiritually

strong. His skin was brown as a nut from exposure, and contrasted oddly with the fair hair and light blue eyes which gazed forth thoughtfully through big shell-rimmed spectacles and beneath thick yellow eyebrows; "like fur tails," thought Effie. He carried an odd leather case besides his small camping pack.

While Vic started up the fire, Effie busied herself at the cupboard. "I'll have supper in no time," she said. "Vic, you get him some dry clo'es."

Vic led their guest into the bedroom to see what garments could be found, while Effie fell upon her larder with fresh enthusiasm. She set forth bread and butter and cream—yes, there must be preserves, too! She had put up these herself, from the rinds of the two watermelons which the ranch had produced. Next, a pot of savoury coffee; and, when the fire was humming, she fell to beating eggs, walking to the closed bedroom door and calling through, while she held the bowl against her waist and kept on beating.

"Now, you two—be all ready—'cause I'm going to put—the omelette on—an' it won't wait for—you," she directed, the beating jouncing her words. "Omelettes are—like rubber dress forms—they're all right while they're blowed up, but soon's they begin—to go down—they haven't got no—figure at all."

Hamlin came, laughing at himself in Vic's much-too-large blue working suit. He scuttled in merry obedience to his place at table, while the omelette hissed its outrage at the assaulting embrace of the hot pan.

"It's incredible!" he cried, as Effie, flushed and pride-inflated, bore it to the table. "Such an omelette simply can't *be* in America! There's only one like it in all the world—in a certain little French town called Mont St. Michel. La Mère Poulard makes it, and it has won her immortal fame——"

"Say, I've been there!" Vic, seated opposite, broke in excitedly. "Isn't that great country, though!"

"So you know it, too! Good! Were you over in '17? Which regiment? I was in laboratory work, base hospital at D——."

"Why, that's where I was! Know Dr. Harlow? Hadn't been for him, I'd never have pulled through."

"*Do* I know him! Rather!"

They were off. Both talked at once, talked every minute, exclaiming, comparing notes, pouring forth experiences, queries. Through it all Effie made out only words and phrases, such as "Belleau Wood," "went West, poor chap," "the Cathedral is coming on," "Château-Thierry," "Gosh, but those were some doughnuts!" "lost both legs," "Soissons," "cemetery's in fine shape, they say," "Elsie Janis sang to make a man forget even the cooties," "shell shock's the worst," "I'd like to see the rehabilitation around Rheims." Never in all the weeks had she guessed that Victor Trench could talk as he was talking now—it was unbelievable, she had not supposed that his tongue knew how to run so fast. The men thumped their fists until cups rattled in saucers, they forgot their coffee and let

it chill, they leaned on elbows across the table, drawing closer in the eagerness of their meeting experiences.

"Then you must have been working in that very hospital when I was brought there!" Vic said.

"I most assuredly was. What was the matter?"

"Dirty wound in the side. Thought I was gone, but modern surgery's a miracle. That dog found me—he was a stray, and he came on me where I'd been overlooked in a field. I'd been trying to find my buddy, and I went so far that they missed me. . . . My buddy . . . nothing but a kid . . . dead when I got to him. Then my own wound knocked me out and the dog happened on me and commenced to wag at me and lick me, and I asked him if he could bring somebody. So he went after help—swam one o' those little rivers—barked 'em all the way to where I lay. . . . That's why I brought the mutt back with me. . . ."

There was a silence as everyone looked at Blighty. He gazed back in perfect comprehension; he knew that his heroism was being recounted, and he accepted the tribute of human eyes in dignified humility, as though saying, "Any but a cur would have done as much!" His only comment was a pleased rumble and a scraping of his tail stump upon the floor.

"Doesn't a wound like that still trouble you?" Hamlin asked.

"Like the devil sometimes. Any work where I have to stoop over."

And Effie, listening in silence, wondered. Surprise,

and with it a creeping pain, filled her mind. This man with whom she dwelt, in full intimacy, with whom she had spent the past weeks in an isolation that had thrown them upon each other for society more completely than any other situation save that of castaways on a desert island—he was still a stranger to her. Man and dog had their secrets together, apart from her. They knew the history of that bond which bound them—that supreme experience of the soldier facing death—and she had never been told. She did not know that he had had a buddy; somehow, as he spoke to Hamlin of "the kid," she felt that this had been his real romance. A love for which he must have flung away his life—only chance had saved it. And his wound—she had not known that he carried one, he had never mentioned his pain. He had not let her share, he had not wanted her sympathy, she had never been admitted to his deepest experience. Again the unformed thought came to her that in his grim, secretive nature he was like the land itself, like this stern plain that met you with the silence of the sphinx. She realized that to no woman would he ever intentionally reveal himself. A man or a dog might once in a while be admitted, but what she was to know of his inner places she would see only when by chance he left the door ajar.

§

"Come a long way?" Vic asked as they rose from the ravished table and pulled up to the fire, lighting pipes.

"About three hundred miles, this trip. I'm a paleontologist, you see, and the places I have to reach don't lie along the railroad track. The early inhabitants, such as the mastodon and his relatives, didn't travel by an Overland Limited."

"Oh, say, fossils, eh?" Vic was instantly keen. "Had an idea there were a lot along this river. I've picked up things now and then." He went to the drawer where Effie always put his clean clothes, and, to her astonishment, dug down under shirts and handkerchiefs and brought forth queer dirty objects.

"Bones! Been hiding 'em like a puppy!" her thoughts cried in dismay. "An' I never knew what made them black marks on his nice shirts I worked all evening to do up!"

The visitor seized upon the fossils. "Why, man, these are valuable! Hello—he-el-lo!" He snatched an especially dirty one, held it aloft like a sacred chalice. "Why, if this should turn out to be from an Eohippus (four-toed horse), it would help confirm my theory! You see, the deposits of the Lower Eocene . . ."

Effie, mending a red and white tablecloth, listened without comprehension. Vic would question, alertly, understandingly; the stranger would explain in bursts of ardour. They behaved as if these earth-crumby old bones were jewels. . . . Hamlin broke off, turning to her.

"Little Mrs. Housewife, you mustn't set me down as altogether foolish," he said, smiling like an old friend.

"You see, I serve an exacting mistress called Pa-le-ont-ol-ogy. She spies upon the past. She digs up fossils—ancient bones and other relics—and puts them together the way you mend a broken teapot. She brings the dead and forgotten to life."

The red tablecloth dropped into Effie's lap. Wide-eyed she listened as he went on slowly, choosing words for her comprehension, revealing the wonder world of that science which so greatly involves the constructive imagination that it makes fellow of him whose vision can outrun proved fact.

As he talked on and on, it was as though he stood upon a hilltop from which he surveyed all time at once. He sketched for them the life of prehistoric man here on the plains—his struggle, his achievement, his passing. Early tribes—the Indians. The coming of the white man. Past, present, future, all seemed to be swept up, for his review, into a vast panorama of the ages. . . .

He opened his box and displayed the instruments. Vic fell upon them hungrily. This lonely life had starved his intellect in a way that Effie would never understand. He poured out a score of questions.

"This," Hamlin said, holding up a small, incisive hammer, "is my favourite weapon. With it I crack open the hard shell in which the nourishing kernel of truth is hidden. Nourishing—but sometimes bitter."

He smoked reflectively through a silence. At length he went on:

"You see, I'm an outcast," he said, and the thought seemed to amuse him. "When I went into the war, I had been teaching in a little walled-in community in the South. It was walled-in, mind, body, and soul. After the war, I went back to my school as a matter of course.

"But everything was changed. The wall suddenly became unbearable. I had been teaching several years in the same groove, but I couldn't get back into it. I had always liked biology, and now I plunged into it and made a special study of Evolution. And the trouble was—" as he paused to knock out his pipe, amusement once more flickered—"I couldn't keep from sharing my treasure. I told my pupils about the wonderful discoveries of science, how it had revealed the most significant truth of life, namely, that man, the man of to-day, was once concealed in a hairy creature crouching on all fours, just as Rodin's Thinker was once hidden in the formless quarry stone.

"And so—well, the upshot was that the school trustees decided I was an 'infidel,' and I lost my job." His smile was both humorous and gentle, as though he were pitying somebody less fortunate than he. "I was dismissed in disgrace. And I've gone forth with only staff and scrip, like a pilgrim of old, to serve Science whom I worship."

"Gosh!" Vic said after a long silence. "The war . . ." he muttered. "Nothing's ever been the same since."

"No. And material devastation was nothing to that

of the spirit. That is, apparently. But out of each devastation something is beginning to grow. Just as the peasants' cottages and the cathedrals are being rebuilt and made better, so we're going to rebuild our souls. You and I have each come out to this free, uninhabited land to seek a new life. We're trying to find ourselves—and, when we find them, they will be new selves."

"How did you know," Vic asked hoarsely, "about *me?*"

Their eyes searched each the other's. "An intuitive fellow feeling, I suppose," Hamlin said. And they all rose to go to bed. It was three in the morning.

§

Keith Hamlin, it seemed, had come to these parts not only to search for fossils but to witness an Indian dance the following night. With a lame horse, he was helpless to reach it, and Vic offered to drive him over. All three went. To Effie, worn by the attrition of monotony, the event was a lark.

"The old generation of Indians is almost gone," the visitor said. "A few years hence, and they will have vanished from the land that knew them. We may never again see such a group as are coming to-night."

They drove for miles. The dull plain vanished, a slip of a green valley sprang up before them, another, another. They were penetrating deep toward the

mountain home of the tribe. Here pools lay like topazes, like turquoises, like aquamarines. The shadows lengthened; they stalked, dark ghosts, across the jewel surfaces of the pools.

Suddenly the road burst through the outer hills, which seemed to close behind them like gates. They were within the hidden place. Before them lay a round green plain encircled by these foothills, and, a more distant girdle, rose the secreting mountains. On the plain, as in a vast circus ring, galloped a score or more of Indians upon their native ponies. They were in full war costume for the riding contests, their great feather headdresses blowing back like a bird's crest, their primitive colours blazing in the fire of the setting sun. They uttered piercing cries as they rode furiously —cries that seemed one with the rude piercing colours —as though they were shouting scarlet and orange and green and blue.

"O-o-o-oh!" Effie's astonishment was almost a sob. The sudden burst of movement, of colour, of exotic beauty was like shock.

"By—gosh!" Vic was muttering. He stopped the car where they could watch. They sat silent until the galloping ceased.

"And that," concluded Hamlin, "is exactly such a sight as broke upon the covered wagons some three quarters of a century ago."

§

"You see, Trench, this country's not the barren blank it looks. It's teeming with life. Life is more than to-day. It's the past, as well."

"Yeh. S'pose that's so," Vic mumbled into a sandwich. Effie had served them a picnic supper and they had left her curled up in the car, awaiting the dance, while they strolled.

"It *is* so. The past is never dead. Primitive man has left his record—squatting, hairy, with implements of stone—bestially gross, but with the evolving spark. And later, the Indians—why, for me this whole region echoes with their war cries, with their chants, with their passionate prayers to the Great Spirit. It tingles with the vigour of the early explorers—Lewis and Clark are more alive to me to-day than the dull-eyed farmers I meet in the flesh, because they and their fellows had more livingness, and it's livingness that persists. When I think of Lewis at the moment he first saw the Rockies rise before him, the gate to his promised land, I thrill *with* him. . . . And Custer—almost half a century since he fell, overpowered by three thousand Sioux and Cheyennes—only an Indian scout and a white horse survived—two hundred and seven of our men wiped out, fighting to the last cartridge, and the Little Big Horn tells no tales. . . . But their very death was so *living*. . . . And the covered wagons that followed the trail blazers—men plodding beside their teams, women and children peeping from the canvas, keen with hope. The promised land! Then, in their

turn, the ranchers—the cattle kings, the cowboys. What a romance! What a tale of daring and heroism and wealth and reckless living and superb cruelty and superb beauty! Somebody will write its epic one day.

"And now—poverty-stricken farmers, the strugglers, the disheartened. But a few will survive, will carry on. Humanity is at last self-consciously creative. You few will be the torch bearers. With science for a guide, you will work out a way. You must. All your forerunners have passed on the responsibility to you—you've got to give your shove in turn, the shove that keeps evolution moving on.

"Do you know," Hamlin concluded after a pause, "I believe that we ex-service men are just starting our real war now—the war of peace. We are separated—in different regiments, in different terrains. But the purpose is the same for all—the common good." He looked Vic sharply in the eye. "It's a much longer and sometimes a much stiffer job than our job in France was," he said. "But we're enlisted. It looks to me as if you were on the firing line now, but you'll never quit. You're holding for a multitude coming on after you."

"Hh!" was all Vic said. But he had forgotten to finish his sandwich.

§

By ten o'clock the Indians were gathered for the dance. A tent, dimly lighted from the top, held per-

formers and spectators; except for Vic's party and two reservation officials, not a white face was present.

One by one the aged braves had arrived. A blind old man was led by two young men; another was so feeble that he was almost carried. They came wrapped in dark blankets and sat in the squatting circle which had formed about the sides. In the centre sat six men at the drum, beating out their insistent measure, chanting as they beat. The chant rose and fell, it would drone for a space but never for a moment did it cease. It seized hold upon ears, nerves, brain.

The three found a retired spot from which they watched. At last ten men of the squatting circle rose, threw off their dark blankets, and revealed themselves in gorgeous raiment.

"Gracious, I'd like to have some o' them 'brawderies!" Effie breathed, as the flaring light shot darts at glittering beadwork.

The ten formed a circle about the drum, and the dance began. "Them feathers!" murmured the rapt Effie.

The headdresses were indeed magnificent. Superb crests, they rose backward from the massive heads. Some were tipped with horsehair tassels, gaily dyed. From the neck dangled slender weasel tails, taken when the little creature wears purest white to shield itself from enemies in the snow. At the back of each headdress showed a lining of rosy down.

"My lollipop!" Effie murmured. No higher could ecstasy climb than to this, her superlative. The beauty

of beaded anklets, of precious embroideries—turquoise, amber, crimson, emerald, rose, purple—was intoxicating, together with the ceaseless rhythm that beat upon her brain, drugging her strangely. She was fascinated, but frightened. Terribly frightened. She clutched Vic's arm.

"Don't you leggo me! They scare me mos' to death! Don't you let 'em get me! What'd they do—scalp me?"

Hamlin laughed reassuringly. "No. The young ones have never learned how, and the old ones are too feeble to do it. Anyway, they don't want to. These Gros Ventres are among the mildest and friendliest—— What's the matter?"

For Effie's gaze was riveted beyond, she was now pale and rigid with fear.

Vic and Hamlin turned. A gigantic Indian had slipped from the shadows and was approaching them. His great form was swathed in red, his feathers rode like a full-rigged ship, his high hawk face was painted with streaks of splendid green across its bronze. He drew nearer——

Effie could hold back no longer. She screamed. "It's *him!*"

"Who's *him?*" Vic demanded. He turned to the Indian. "Hello, Rufe."

Effie could only gasp. "It's the one—I seen—when I got off the train that first day. He—scared me so—I run away an' got lost."

Vic tilted back his head and, for the first time in her knowledge of him, he gave vent to a hearty laugh. "Poor old Rufe! He's the meekest of the tribe! His wife manages him with a potato masher."

Hamlin addressed the Indian in his own tongue, and a flash of pleasure responded through the green paint. For minutes they conversed, then Hamlin turned to Effie.

"Mr. Rufus Snake Head presents his compliments and asks if you will join him in the Ring Tail Dance. I think," he added, "you'd better. You will boast to your grandchildren of the experience."

Effie never remembered how she did it. She was frozen with fear; and yet, somehow, she found herself within that slow-moving hypnotic circle. It had been steadily growing, as one after another slipped into it; until now some fifty Indians, most of them men, were moving endlessly leftward, always to that drugging chant and beat of drum. Moving on, however, with no end to the circle, like eternity. . . . At her right was the giant Rufus; he touched her arm lightly, deferentially, as he guided.

She found herself obsessed with the desire to perfect that curious step which looked so childishly simple, which became so difficult when you tried it. You took a step left, the right foot slightly forward; you dipped the right knee on the beat; that was all, and yet she, a dancing nymph in her own art, felt strangely awkward and incorrect. She clasped her hands loosely before

her as the squaws did, she kept moving slowly, ceaselessly circling. . . . Her eyes drooped, but still, as if entranced, she followed the mesmerism of that beat. . . . Like giving way to an opiate. . . . Flaring, fading light, savage colours like cries, bronze lithe bodies moving, close-gathered faces above the drum, voices wailing, sinking in the chant. . . .

§

Hamlin's horse mended, and he prepared to leave the ranch in another day. The last evening was surprisingly warm for autumn; he and Vic and Effie sat outdoors and chatted, Effie sewing while the men smoked pipes.

"It was rather remarkable, the Indians' wanting you to dance with them," Hamlin observed to her. He cast a keen glance at her as she winced and flushed. The thought came to her that he seemed to know things without being told.

"They *wanted* me, didn't they?" she appealed wistfully.

"It was all Snake Head's own idea. And they usually hold their ceremonies aloof. But they know whom to trust. An Indian's judgment of a white is unerring."

"Im glad *they* wanted me," she said with shy fervour.

§

Hamlin leaned back and his eyes followed a late bird wheeling against the unbroken stretch of paling blue. They dropped, and searched the near distance whence came the frightened bleat of a lamb strayed from its mother. Already the dusk was closing in about the gray flock and softening the harsh cruelty of the landscape. The embers of sunset tarried in the west; against their glow the buttes stood black in silhouette. In the east, against a blue-black sky, other buttes caught the light and glowed pale gold.

"What beauty!" he exclaimed. "Beauty in everything—in the space, the sky, the wealth of colour, the sculpture of these bluffs—in the grace of that lone bird, in the mother love of that ewe's answer to her lamb, in the peace of solitude and approaching night. The animals and birds know. It's all summed up in a verse or two of Job." And he quoted:

"'But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee; or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee.'

"'Speak to the earth,'" he repeated, "that's the key to the whole. Primitive man knew it when he made him a shelter and clubbed a woman into it, and begat children by her, and called these plains home. The Indian above all knew it—could such rites as you witnessed last night ever have grown up except that these tribes for generations with all their souls spoke to the earth? The Dance of Grass, of the Harvest, of the Animals. . . . The early settlers spoke, and

the ranchers, and to all of them the earth replied and they prospered.

"But the American of to-day has lost the key. If we are ever to learn again, it is the European peasant, the stranger within our gates, who will teach us. He knows. He burrows into the soil, he nestles against it, clamouring at its breast for nourishment—and the earth yields to him."

Through a silence only the knocking out of Vic's pipe was heard. At length Hamlin rose. "Well, little Mrs. Housewife, I shall be off early, so it's time for me to turn in."

§

When they got up next morning, they found that Hamlin had not waited for breakfast but had gone. The house felt suddenly damp and dark. But to Effie it brightened when, about to make the coffee, she found the pot so placed as to weight a slip of paper. She read:

"Since you have refused me the privilege of making material return for your lavish hospitality, I can leave with you only a gift of the spirit. Perhaps it will some day prove of value. Do not lose it. It is the key which, rightly applied, cannot fail to open the door:

"*Speak to the earth.*"

§

Hamlin, riding thoughtfully away, recalled his written words. "What did I tell her that for?" he asked him-

self. "She knows it better than anybody. She's instinctive. She drives so directly at truth, at the essence of things, that she doesn't see anything in the way. I wish she weren't going to meet a thank-you-marm—but alackaday! We live in this world, not the next. . . . Get up, Joffre, old boy!"

And he hastened on, in the quest of Eohippus.

XVII

§

SOME vigorous rush of well-being seemed to have swept in with Hamlin's visit. The weather, the creatures, the home were carried on its high tide. Two sick lambs were found to be skipping irrepressibly; a ram, which had been seriously lame, walked easily of a sudden, recovering like some gout-ridden old rascal who sees fresh festivity ahead; and an unseasonable efficiency seized upon the hens. Moreover, Hamlin had sent a check for Vic's fossils which he had placed with a museum.

Vic waxed communicative. "Not a loss of any kind, lately, except the wagon, and next year I'll fit up a new one. Don't know what's got into the sheep, they're doing so well. Fat old woollies. If we can have a decent winter now, they'll be in fine shape to attend to their spring job. Won't be dying off like *this* year! Something doing *next* lambing!"

"Vicky!" Effie was breathing excitedly. "Will the lady sheep all get little babies?"

"Sure. Married or single."

"Do—do they—lay eggs, Vicky, or just——"

"Gosh, kid! Don't get this outfit mixed with the

dinosaur ranch that Hamlin's looking for! You wait. You'll see what you'll see. Lambs, and lambs, and lambs. Two apiece, maybe. Gee."

§

Vic gathered a load in the wagon one day, for town. He had decided to sell some of the few remaining spring lambs, now that they were in such fine condition and should bring a good price. There were eggs to add to the sales, and several of Effie's chickens. Altogether, the little load would amount to a tidy sum.

He gazed proudly at the lambs. Their young sides swelled to a fine fatness; "Not a skinny chop among 'em," he gloated.

"Oh, have a heart!" Effie implored, struggling with a tear. "Say, it nearly kills me to see 'em go! They trust us so, an' they look at us like they was sure we wouldn't let anything happen to 'em, an' here we're sending 'em off to have paper ruffles put around their poor little French chops!" Effie's mind gazed upon the paper ruffles as upon the shroud of a loved one.

"Now, look here, stock raising is no sob-sister act," he argued sternly. "This thing of naming 'em Lillian and Dorothy Gish and Douglas Fairbanks, and kissing 'em, don't go on a ranch. A lamb isn't a Lillian; it's cold cash—see?"

In spite of his words she ran to the wagon to give Lillian one last embrace, at which the woolly one bleated emotionally with a gaze like that of a broken

blossom. And yet, while Vic rebuked Effie, he knew that along with her warm-heartedness flowed a practicality that often exceeded his own. In a flash of recollection he heard himself asking, "What's one lamb?" and her replying, "Seven dollars."

§

Vic drove to town in high spirits. This was his first real market load, and he felt a stock raiser in earnest. The horses panted to keep up with his urging, Lillian and Dorothy and Douglas bleated appealingly at the giddy jouncing he was giving them. Never had farm horses made twenty-seven miles at such a pace; they were almost spent, but he shouted genial commands to them, and contrived to drive them into the centre of town with a flourish, the air of a chariot racer bringing up at the goal.

"Say, fine bunch o' lambs, that," the grocer cried.

"Not much the matter with 'em, is there?" Vic was like a new man; his small taste of prosperity had swept away his moroseness, he felt like slapping the shoulder of the world.

He had started before daybreak, saying that he would attend to business, give the horses a rest, and be back that night. If the lambs brought as much as he hoped, he would be able not only to meet the interest due but to pay off one of the smaller loans. It turned out that the commission man just then in Minoleum was paying

better than his predecessor; Vic received a good bit more than he had counted on, and life took on an aspect of veritable radiance.

He hurried to make the payments and to purchase Effie's carefully stinted list of necessaries. The horses were badly used up; he'd better give them an extra rest. Well; it was a long time since he'd been in Minoleum with any money in his pockets! He stood in the centre of Broadway and looked around.

The town lay there upon the desert, like a huge cookie from which he might bite where and as much as he chose. He would nibble here and there about the edge —try the flavour—bite in more deeply, perhaps. . . .

§

Minoleum is the rechristened Red Coyote Butte of old Western days. The strangely formed bluff which gave it the original name still lifts its pointed muzzle to the sky, and everybody has forgotten the short-lived factory which caused a bubble of boom, named the town after the worthless floor-covering which it attempted to produce, and died there on the edge of the wilderness. Old-timers still call it "Red Coyote," still speak of "Main Street" instead of "Broadway," and still boast with honourable pride that it used to be "the toughest town between the Pap and the Whisky Straight rivers."

It has shrunk since those days of its glory to a mere

blotch upon the surface of nowhere-in-particular. But its tradition has grown with the years. Minoleumites will point out to you Ed Jimson's place where Tufty Hicks shot Ed after buying up all the liquor he had in stock, so that Ed's widow gathered up the cash in both apron pockets. "Always provide for the widow and fatherless in advance, before you make 'em that," Tuffy had nobly stated as his code of honour. The next day he had departed with the widow—and his own cash.

They will tell you, too, how twenty cowboys from the L Bar X rode into town one night; got out, at the gentle urge of the gun, everybody who could play any instrument—fiddle, cornet, or harmonica—and did a Virginia Reel down the street, on their horses, howling and shooting the street lamps in time to the music, the impromptu orchestra being obliged to perform its accompaniment in *robes de nuit*.

They will tell you these and a hundred other tales of the West of other days—that West so long since dead and buried. They are as smug in the pride of their traditions as any New Englander in his tales of Bunker Hill or Paul Revere. The traditions are lawless, they are brutal, they are bad. But theirs is a fine brutality, with a clean-cut vigour about it; a tang there is, a certain wholesome flavour of primitive life in their very lawlessness, that lifts them far above the sinister law-breaking of to-day.

To-day one finds no drunken and howling cowboys

parading down the street. Nobody shoots anybody or openly marauds. Judge Lynch is dead. The old names of Tim Hines' Bar, Coyote Butte Bar, and others similar have been painted out and one sees now in their places, Minoleum Pool Room, or New Western Pool Hall. But little dark illicit doors open secretly upon passages; Minnie Smith's Rooming House vies in a dark alley with that of Queenie Peters; there is whispered advice to the thirsty—"See Si Sinker, he'll fix you up."

Broadway is lined with little busy shops. Supplies of all sorts for the home, for the larder, for the ranch; a department store where the latest fashions are displayed; souvenir stores where the ceaseless summer file of dusty motorists from farther east may purchase miniature sombreros, papooses, bucking bronchos, and Indian moccasins all manufactured in Hoboken, New Jersey. Sprinkled through, such signs as "Chiropractor," or "Christian Science Reading Room"—for isolation is no longer isolated, modernism finds it out. In the window of the drug store, which is a general meeting place for the young people, stands a lewd figurine, goo-goo-eyed and clad in but a scant ruffle of gauze, an obscene French placard over its shoulders. To be sure, few Minoleumites can read the French; but the figurine needs no translation.

Where vice once was frank, rude, and primitive, one finds now that it is furtive, sly, and salacious. There is a "good end" of town and a "bad end": the former

lives in neat little bird-cage houses all alike, its irrigated door yards making a checker board of green squares against the sagebrush background. It relieves the motonony of life with basket picnics and Chautauqua entertainments. It is justifiably proud of its three churches, its consolidated school, its sanitary drinking fountain, and its public library. Neither end of town bothers about the other.

§

"Hello, there, Bill. Say, what's on? 'Lo, Mike. Bad day for the grave diggers."

"*I*'ll say it is. Say, glad to see you in town again."

"Not so bad being here."

Vic strolled along Broadway convivially. Such geniality he rarely showed. The looking-up of affairs at his ranch, the neat sum in his pocket, made him actually light-hearted, as if he were somebody else. He kept on strolling, greeting young men.

"Say, old scout, good to see you again."—"Looking fine, Deming; what feed do they use to fat you up?"

"Good-afternoon, Trench. May I have a few words with you alone?" An angular voice, earnest and fussy. Behind it, a spare figure topped by a face that beamed through spectacles in a worried desire to express goodwill. Vic recognized Pickens, the minister, and, with the unerring instinct of an animal, he drew back into the cave of his customary moroseness.

"No time. Got to get back to the outfit."

"I won't keep you but a moment. Just here we can talk, Brother."

Vic breathed a "Hell!" at the "Brother." He knew the cajolery of it. But, although snorting in wrath like a captive beast, he followed—there seemed no escape. Mr. Pickens led to a secluded bench in the square near by and seated himself, motioning to his companion to do likewise.

"No time, I tell you. Hurry up, get it off your chest. I've got to go." Vic stood, ignoring the bench, with an air of being about to flee.

It was most unpropitious, and the earnest, worried, well-meaning Mr. Pickens almost lost heart. But he was determined to obey the Behest. He felt himself responsible for shedding the Light upon the path of this benighted youth.

"Brother," he plunged in, "I feel it my duty to exhort you, to save you before it is too late—to save you from the Lake of Fire. You are living unlawfully——"

The zealous Mr. Pickens never knew just what happened. He had a dizzy and vague recollection similar to that of the victims of a TNT explosion. It seemed to him that Trench had leaped into the air; that he had emitted a howl of rage, a volley of oaths. And then the good man found himself alone; on the park bench, his mouth ajar, with only his own worried good-will for company.

Mr. Pickens was a truly good man according to his lights. On the bitterest winter night he would lay off the purple and green crocheted bed slippers in which he

slept, renounce the jar of heated sand which snuggled so lovably against his feet, and go forth to the sick and dying. But Mr. Pickens lacked tact. Virtue minus tact leaves a remainder which is the most sadly unappreciated of human qualities.

§

The afternoon ran into evening, into night, and Vic was still at Si Sinker's. He had gone there upon leaving Mr. Pickens; had slammed his way through the outer door, then the inner, back into a small stuffy room where the elect gathered, where Sinker "fixed 'em up." He had drunk bad liquor, had listened to bawdy stories, had gambled. At first he had won—then lost—then won back. . . .

He didn't care. He was drunk with something more potent than whisky—his own rage. It shot flames to his brain. "Fool, butting in. What business has he got in my affairs? . . . So they'll run my bed and board for me, will they? A —— —— sight they will! Damn every one of 'em!" From abuse of the parson, his abuse had extended to "them," meaning the community, the state, the world. As a matter of fact, Mr. Pickens was the first and only person who had ever directly criticized Vic for his home relations; but Vic inflamed his own imagination; he seethed in revolt at a fancied tyranny, he pictured a world charging him with unlawful living, consigning him to the Lake of Fire. He turned upon his accusers, consigned them to the

same. All in fantasy—a violent, unreal mind drama that acted itself out within his heated brain.

"I'm not going home. Never," he was shouting within his mind while he dealt soft-sliding cards upon the table. "A holy mess she's got me into! They can't leave me alone—and all because of *her!* Serves me right for taking up with a woman. Fool I am to have done it. But this is the end. I'll never go back—never see her again. Serves me right. Fool."

§

Long after midnight he went forth into the street. He had lost his winnings and won his losings—in funds, fortunately, he was where he had begun. The liquor's effects had passed. He was tired out; spent with the night of brainstorm. One determination, however, had taken firm root: he would never go back. It was Effie who had let him in for all this; he was being persecuted because he had taken up with her. That was what you got for it; you took up with a woman because she was lost and starving, and next thing the whole population was after you. . . . Lake of Fire! . . . He'd never go home, never see her again as long as he lived. Let her have the ranch. He hated her. She'd made trouble enough for him—if he ever set eyes on her again, he'd be——

A wheezy, saccharine voice at his elbow. He turned.

"Darlin'—don't go—so fast. I can't—ketch up to you!" it panted.

He had not noticed where he was going as he strode on angrily, but he discovered now that he was in a slimy dark little side street where only the faintest door light glimmered above a small sign. He knew the sign. And he knew Queenie Peters. That wheeze—she was stout and asthmatic, and she wore large-figured dresses, and she seemed always proffering her great soft bosom.

"Darlin'—I thought you wasn't never—comin' to town again!" she panted, wheedling. "I been wantin' tuh see yuh suh bad——"

Queenie stopped. Somehow she felt that she had *been* stopped, and yet nothing had occurred. Vic stood staring at her—at her thick, painted mouth, her sagging chin; he smelled the gross perfume with which she always reeked.

Something swept from him. It was as though he had been shaken from a bad dream, as though the brainstorm had cleared in one rush of departing thunder cloud and left of a sudden an open sky. He made no answer. But he dashed from the slimy little alley and left Queenie wheezing, wondering, beside her sinister door light.

It fell, blear, upon the red paint of her thick mouth, upon her fat whitened nose, upon the jaded dullness of her eyes. Someone entered the alley from the other end; Queenie gave a weary wheeze, then mechanically took up once more what to her was the routine task of survival.

"Darlin'——" she began, all over again.

XVIII

§

IT WAS well into the forenoon when Vic reached home. The horses were not for hurrying, but he forced them. A nervous haste possessed him; he was stern and taciturn again, pushing his beasts in a silence broken only by the whip.

It was queer, the feeling he had. As if he must rush home to make sure everything was all right. There was no reason to think anything was wrong. But those thoughts that he had hurled at Effie, all the way from town, twenty-seven miles. . . . It was as though they might have struck her, and he must hasten to see that they had not injured. He must try to save her in time—save her from the blows of his thoughts.

§

Home. He threw down the lines and jumped from the wagon. The house wore an odd air. As if deserted. Door and windows closed. Effie always left them open when she merely stepped out to the chicken house or the garden. Something felt chunky in his throat.

He strode to the door, snatched it open. Everything in apple-pie order—a put-away look, the way a tidy

woman would leave a house if she went away for good. Pans hung up. Dishes on the shelves. An air of neat finality about inanimate things.

"Effie!" he shouted. He had never before called her name. Again, "Effie!"

That neat finality was the only answer.

He felt stiff all over, and cold. . . . Those thoughts that he had hurled like missiles. . . . Had she fled from their attack? . . . . Of course, she knew nothing about them, he told himself, and yet it all gave him a strange feeling that they had not missed their aim. . . . He stepped outside again, pulling the door sharply behind him. He wanted to shut that house from him. It was less empty outside, in the wilderness, than within those walls so lately warm with the happy disorder of living.

§

The chickens had been fed, he found, the cow tended, everything was in perfect order—all with that air of bringing matters to a tidy close. Of course, he told himself, Rachel Darlington or Mrs. Olefsky had come and taken Effie for a call; but all the while he knew that he didn't believe what he told himself. She always stayed at home on Saturday to "bake up." She was very systematic.

What he did believe was that hideous idea which kept peering into his brain and leering at him. It was the idea that Effie had left him.

But surely, he argued back at the idea, she couldn't have been offended just because he had failed to return last evening as he had said he would. That wasn't like her. She was good-tempered, she took things easily. But those *thoughts*. He had hurled them like stones at her. No matter how cleverly our reason refutes the notion, we always cherish a secret belief in the power of our own thoughts. Like stones he had hurled them; and she had fled from their cruel onslaught.

Effie. Gone. Left him. He was alone. Alone the way he used to be, with only the scarecrow and the dog for company.

All at once he knew. Knew how frightfully she mattered to him, how empty the universe was without her, how it was she, and only she, that had made the terrible game worth the candle. But he would never tell himself what he knew.

§

Chores and chores. He kept dragging on at his tasks for hours. He forgot that he had had no food. He moved like a slow machine. He couldn't think about the work.

It was late afternoon when he discovered that a sheep had strayed. He didn't care. It seemed to make no difference now. But, still acting like a mechanism, he set out toward the river to trace it.

The trees along the banks had shed most of their

leaves, making a warm russet bed on either side. Bushes, too, were baring themselves; but even now clusters of tardy berries hung like brilliant pendants, glittering through the branches. A magpie flashed black and white through the thinly clad cottonwoods; the round wet head of a beaver popped up at the river's edge, vanished. Vic noted near it a tree trunk cut half through as cleanly as with a saw.

He wandered on, trying to look for the lost sheep, forgetting to look, growing heavier with every moment, wondering vaguely what this lassitude was that had crept upon him. He was utterly weary. Nothing mattered, he'd as soon quit. . . .

A spot of keen green. It caught the sun and blazed among bare bushes, in a warm nestling hollow where the russet leaves made a cushion and the berries hung bloody and thick-clustering. It was her green sweater—the one she had worn that first night. Effie. Curled there like a Turk. Eating berries.

With one stride he was there. He had her in his arms. He was rude, assaulting. He pressed her until her little insides creaked, he kissed her stained mouth. Over and over he kissed it, violently. Crushing, ravishing. She was without rouge; only the berries' scarlet painted her lips.

She stared at him in amazement, gasping, paling. Then her eyes went soft, as though tears were near them; her arms folded about his neck.

"I thought you'd gone," he whispered chokily against her cheek. He buried his face in her neck. She smelled of fruit and sun and fresh youth.

"Silly! I jus' d'cided you'd been kep' over, an' I got my work done up early, so I packed me a little picnic all by myself, an' I come out to spend a nice day by the river an' pick buf'lo berries for some more jell."

"I'll carry the pail. Come along." All of a sudden he had remembered himself; with a snort he let her go as if she had been a thistle or a bumblebee picked up by mistake. He took the pail of berries and strode off toward the house, silent, letting her follow, with trots and skips to keep up; she carried her little lone picnic basket. He scarcely spoke again that day, not even when the stray was found safe at home; and when evening came he buried himself in his account book. But she was no longer deceived. She knew.

Effie, not knowing why, never again used make-up. It was as though some subconscious mentor had shown her the clean potency of her own frank youth. She cast off the exaggerated image created by rouge. Vic had kissed her berry-stained lips. One day the vanity case was carried out, with ashes and old cans, to the dump.

XIX

§

THE day of russet and ochre and gold and scarlet by the river was the end. That night the mercury slid as though it would never stop, and brought up at six below zero. A furious wind descended from the north. It rocked the slight cabin, took it in its teeth, shook it brutally. It snatched the last leaves from their stems and scattered them wantonly; it hurled the berries over the ground like a vandal snapping a string of precious beads. Vic and Effie shivered still more under the miserable blankets and the slablike cotton quilt; they added his old overcoat, his sweater, and at last the new winter coat which Effie had bought in town for five-ninety-four. It hadn't fooled her; but, in that Vic knew nothing of what women's apparel ought to cost, she had trusted that he would "fall for" its "all-wool" label, and she would manage somehow, knitting herself a sweater to eke out its feeble protection. She even laid his old gray army scarf across their feet, a meagre stripe of warmth; and, after doing it, couldn't keep her icy feet within its narrow zone, but drew them up into a small cramped bundle against her little sitting-down place.

The morning was slate-coloured. A dreary sky of presaging cloud roofed the earth, stretching from one horizon to the other. It felt like being under a bowl of cold heavy pewter. The smell of snow was on the air.

Blighty shot to the stove whenever he was admitted to the house. "Hurry up—get warm quick—we've got to go look after the sheep," Vic ordered him, hunting for his scarf among the bedclothes. He went forth muffled, his cap drawn down, his shabby old overcoat buttoned tightly.

Effie watched through the window now, instead of the open door. Against the sky the sheep were drearily gray. They huddled closer than ever. The lambs, even the most incorrigible among them, those who had asserted the rights of youth mutinously in fair weather, now clung to their dams in dread. With animal instinct they felt trouble breeding in the sky.

Vic looked over the band, studied their condition. It was excellent, Yes, they ought to go through the winter in fine shape if the weather didn't get *too* bad.

"You stay here with 'em, Blight. I'm going down and look over the shelter. Want to make sure it's sound. Something might come up we'd have to get 'em in in a hurry."

For a while he worked with hammer and saw at the dugout in the bluff's side, putting a few last touches to the repairs that he had already made in its shed portion,

making sure that the earth floor of the semi-cave was clean. When this was thoroughly seen to, he returned to the band.

§

Effie's feet were so cold on the uncovered floor of badly fitted boards that she had to stop now and then and dance a melancholy but resolute jig to enable her to go on working. It occurred to her that this was only the beginning, only the first real winter day; that months of such cold, and far worse, lay ahead; Rachel had talked of "thirty-nine below." It was only (she glanced at the calendar which set forth the enticements of a certain devilled ham), only November eleventh, and for five, perhaps six months to come, she would shrivel and congeal in a log cabin which stood forth like a solitary instrument offering itself to the winds of heaven to play upon it what tunes they might list.

At length she finished cooking and cleaning, the house was in order. She must go out and see to the chicken house, too. In the five-ninety-four coat, with its collar turned up, and a shawl, left by the Iowan, over her bobbed head, she started.

The threatened snow had come. Suddenly, the dull pewter sky had released it, and it was pelting down in stinging particles that were almost ice. She bent her head, her body; she had to battle to reach the chicken house.

§

Returning, she took a path by the woodshed, which brought her nearer to the sheep, Vic was with them once more. Sheep, shepherd, dog. He was like a bundle on end in his thick overcoat, head drawn down into his muffler, hands driven deep into pockets. Blighty's hair blew about, and he looked shrunken and miserable, and yapped as if in distress. Sheep, shepherd, dog. Gray and lonely against the pewter sky. Over all, the snow falling fast. . . .

She saw Vic look at his watch. Then, through the carrying stillness, she heard:

"Now, Blighty! Silence!"

The dog stopped yapping and waited, alertly still beside his master. Vic took off his cap; he stood with bowed head, cap in hand. The sharp snow beat down upon his bare head. He did not move. The dog's eyes were fixed upon his face. A frayed end of the old army scarf came loose and fluttered like a gray memory of the trenches.

§

Effie puzzled. Before she reached the house she looked back again, and saw that Vic had put on his cap and was walking about now, the dog trotting behind him. That strange brief ceremony, whatever it might be, was over.

"Mus' be time to get the stew on for dinner."

She glanced at the clock. Five minutes past eleven —eleven—the eleventh of the month. . . .

Not until then did she understand. Man and dog. It was theirs, their memory, their tragedy, their loyalty, their rite. In that two minutes' silence of Armistice Day she knew that untold memories were bound up. Blighty's human heroism—the buddy's death—experiences which she had heard only briefly sketched, the full facts of which she would never know. Experiences which she did not share, from which she was shut out. Man and dog shared them.

There was a stab in the thought. But something followed bigger than the stab; another emotion, wiping out the sting of self. With a little sob she turned to Vic's old blue farm coat where it hung from a hook, and buried her face in it. It smelled sheepy. She didn't care. She stroked it, smell and all.

XX

§

IN EFFIE'S memory that winter was always black. Nothing could wipe out the picture. In vain did she look forth upon the infinite whiteness of it and strive to impress upon her mind its iridescent beauty, its diamond sheen. Miles and miles of unmarred white; white that turned to flaming rose at sunrise, white that glittered sapphire at noon, white that folded away at last into purple shadows. Now it tossed crystals, now opals, but always white. . . .

No. *Black.*

Effie's thoughts, travelling over the white miles, always brought up at the same goal. At blackness.

For one thing, the wind blew frightfully, with only now and then a day's cessation; and the wind, she knew, was black. She could see it. It swooped down like terrible wings; it beat, it shrieked. She watched the wings as they tore by.

And the nights. She had never known that nights could be so long. They not merely looked black; they felt so, to the touch. Thick, impenetrable nights.

And the imprisonment was black. Steadily it grew deeper. Snow would fall and lie where it fell; it did

not melt and become slush and vanish, as in New York. Days would elapse, once three weeks, before more snow came, but there was a solid foundation to build upon, and the next snowfall would wall her in by that the more strongly. It was like sitting chained and watching yourself being slowly immured—stone upon stone—the wall growing until it darkened your very soul. Black stones.

And the cold itself, to Effie's picturing, felt black. It was a fabric in which she was wrapped, a sable pall. Only by fighting could she hold off that creeping lassitude, an oscitancy born of physical depression. The sensation, queerly, was like that of heat prostration. But she mustn't give in. She must keep on fighting. She knew it instinctively, as the drowning know that they must clutch at everything. At last, by clutching, she got hold of the life line. She felt herself being pulled to safety.

The body adjusted itself. It learned, with the speed of youth and health, to adapt to this new condition. Temperament followed suit. The jigs became frequent, they were always available when feet grew numb, and their effect didn't stop at feet. Effie felt heartened in spirit whenever she had paused to dance herself warm in body.

Singing, too, helped. She "kep' a-kidding herself," as she told Charley Ross, by playing "that there Spring Song." And Charley joined in. Probably no more remarkable musical performance has ever been heard.

Effie had only to blow off a bar on the old harmonica left by the Iowan, when Charley would place himself in centre stage, lift his head with the aplomb of a prima donna, and burst into long-drawn blats.

§

"Vicky, I thought o' something," Effie began diffidently when the lamp was lighted and they had settled down to one of their usual evenings, she sewing, he reading—two or three silent hours, then bed.

"Hh?" He did not take his eyes from his book, but grunted the query with a frown and an air of being outrageously disturbed.

She came around and stood before him.

"Vicky. I—I don't know much."

"Think you have to tell me that?" Still reading. More intent, more frowning. He pushed his nose into the book to let her see that he didn't intend to be interrupted. Women. Always butting in.

"I—I was wondering—now there's so much evening every night—if you'd learn me sumpthing."

"Gosh!" He slammed the book down upon its face. "Say, I've got to finish this *History of the Oregon Trail!* . . . 'Learn you' something! How could I teach anybody that wants to be 'learned'?"

Passing above her head, this did not even graze. "It wouldn't take much time," she pleaded shyly. "Just a little every night. You could do it quick, an' then read your hist'ry all the rest o' the time. An' I

could be saying it over, what you learned me, all day while I'm working."

"Hh! Never got through fractions, even, did you?"

"'Rithmetic don't matter. But I'd like to read more—not just easy books. I'd like to read hard ones—them." She nodded toward his shelf.

"Go ahead yourself and read. All there is to it."

"I do try. But I miss a lot I can't make out. If you'd help me just a little. You see, I never did get to go to school only between spells o' working. 'Bout all I can remember is to say *ing* an' not to say 'ain't.'"

"Hh!" Scorning further discussion with this ignoramus, he snatched up his book and plunged once more into the Oregon Trail.

But the next evening he walked to the bookshelf, studied it, selected *The Desert*, by John Van Dyke, and laid it open on the table. Effie was knitting thick socks for him.

"Here! Hurry up," he commanded. "Think I can wait all night?"

She glanced up. "What, Vicky?"

He pointed sternly to the first page. "Begin to read—here. Want to see how much you *do* know—or how little, more likely."

She gulped her surprise, not without a flicker of amusement tucked away in the back of the surprise, and hurried to where he waited. Seating herself, she began the first lesson.

"'. . . watching the cañons shift into great

slashes of blue and purple shadow, and the ridges flame with edgings of glittering fire.'"

At the end of three pages, he shut the book. He grunted. But, "Not so bad," he admitted.

"Really? You think so?"

"Of course, you're very ignorant," he informed her with a shrug. "But you might be able to learn. Got to have a lesson every evening. You be studying all this part to-morrow—go over the words you got wrong. Then I'll review you."

The lessons lasted all winter. The teacher was always brusque, always critical; his praise was rare and diluted. But he was as persistent as she. In fact, it was he who every evening took out the book. "Come along," he would growl impatiently.

The curriculum included reading, spelling, grammar, history, and geography. Effie chose to omit arithmetic, as she knew enough to count eggs and to figure the cost of prunes, and she realized instinctively that it was through the other subjects that her bleak life would take on colour. Arithmetic was gray as a plain.

§

There were little hollows in the lee of the buttes; there were sheltered crannies in certain coulee depths; there were natural stockades formed where the cottonwoods and stout shrubs along the river bunched more thickly than usual; in such spots the sheep would gather and press their bodies together for warmth. They

massed solidly until they seemed but one—one gray monster of prehistoric dimensions; colossal, inert. For hours they would remain, stupefied by the cold, almost motionless, in dull and dumb endurance.

Beside them, Vic would move about for warmth, beating his hands together, stamping his feet; at length slipping into an apathy as dull as that of the beasts. Then he would rouse: "Can't freeze to the spot," he would tell himself, and again the hand-beating and foot-stamping would begin. It grew utterly wearisome; easier to let go, to sink into that drugging stupor of the cold, to let it have its way with him.

But beneath the physical exhaustion another current flowed—a stream of anticipatory thought. Under this black bitterness of winter his consciousness savoured the spring. Lambing. A big bunch, new members of the band. No ewes dying off this time, he'd see to that. Lambs and lambs. Some pep in 'em. You wait.

The wind swept over him like a rush of icy water, throttling him until he gasped for breath. Four toes froze that winter, and his north cheek. He clapped handfuls of snow upon them; like the devil they hurt, but he gritted his teeth and stamped on.

David Olefsky came to help, and was snowbound. For weeks he stayed, unable to get back home. He slept like a dog, curled on the small sofa of the living room which was not long enough for him to stretch out upon. He cried and talked in his sleep because of his

uncomfortable posture, and once he sang a Polish folk song.

§

"Learn me—I mean, teach me—some o' your songs, Davy." Despite her new erudition, Effie had her lapses.

"All right. If I do, learn me some o' them New York songs?"

"Sure."

So a Polish harvest song was bartered for "Yes, We Have No Bananas"—pearl for dross. Effie took on David as her second pupil. Already Rachel Darlington had found new impetus through her instruction; now this squat, ash-coloured Polish boy, stolid always until music set him vibrating, tingled under the same stimulus. It had come like an electric current into these two lives deadened by isolation.

At length the weather permitted David to go home. When he returned he brought a bundle, stuck it at Effie.

"What is it, Davy?"

"Open it."

A little coat, of silky, delicious fur! Fur that excited her through the sense of touch; making small sensuous noises, she buried her face in it Then she examined it. Exquisite pale brown skins of rare value, rudely dressed, rudely sewn together.

"But what kinda fur, Davy?"

"Beaver."

She started. "But Vic says beaver's 'gainst the law."

David turned sullen. "Don't care. I'd jus' soon be jugged—fur you."

§

Snow sifted in between logs here and there where the earth had fallen out, although Vic had chinked up thoroughly in the fall. It sifted in through the floor. They woke in the mornings to find the coverings frozen fast to the foot of the bed, glued there by congealed vapour given off through the night from warm bodies. The frozen bed-clothes had to be jerked loose when Effie stripped the bed.

Chilblains. Taste of purgatory. Her heels swelled monstrously, turned dully red, burned like torches. At first, upon going to bed, they would ache with cold; then the heat would mount until, in torment, she would dangle her feet out of bed, dipping them into the icy bath of the room's air.

§

David brought a new dog to assist Blighty. It was needed; the coyotes grew hungrier and bolder. Their howling now was terrible in the night. They seemed one with the storm; as though they were powers of darkness shrieking their fury in unison with the gale. But so closely were the sheep guarded that there were few losses. Still hungry, wailing with starvation and

chagrin, the thieves' chorus would make off, dying like a spent wind.

§

Vic herded the sheep by day. At night they were taken to shelter when necessary, and he buried himself in his books. The Astronomy was brought forth again; now he followed the winter stars in their courses.

"Castor and Pollux! Hello, there, old boys, I get you! . . . Oh, say, that's Lepus, the Hare! Stretch your imagination, and it *does* look like a jack rabbit in the Bad Lands! . . . The Crimson Star. . . . And Betelgeux again—yes, we know you!

"'If thou wouldst gaze on starry Charioteer
And hast heard legends of the wondrous Goat. . . .'

"Say, but it's great to find 'em just where the book says they ought to be!"

He would come in stamping snow off, his mind swinging away into space. . . .

He would read late into the evening. Or he would let the book drop and sit staring in at the little open door in the stove where the embers dropped. Rosy glow; puff of light; darkness. Like life. One sure thing, anyhow: darkness at last.

He wondered: what was the big idea, anyhow? To make us, the way we make a fire, in order to warm things up for a little, and then shovel us out. Ashes.

But nowadays he didn't spend much time in such thoughts. He had been wont to do so. Back in the early summer, before a woman had butted in. She had butted in on everything, even pessimism. He never had time any more to consider the misery of life. You can't get a chance with a woman around, nosing into your very thoughts.

What he did think about in these weeks of imprisonment was Hamlin's visit. Things the visitor had said —more significant, more alive now than when they were uttered. He saw the procession of life on these plains as Hamlin had pictured it: prehistoric man, hairy, hunched, sordid, and yet dimly apprehending one of life's great secrets. The Indians—savage, wise—they knew the same secret. And then the whites. Lewis and Clark. The valour of that exploration, the courage that surmounted flesh. Custer, too; death and violence undreaded. Vic's breath caught as a sweeping vision of spirit's splendour flashed for an instant. . . . Early trail-blazers, later cowboys and cattle kings. . . . A vast panorama, painted in throbbing colour, tingling with motion, with daring. Yes, Hamlin had told the truth when he said that these all knew the secret; they had "spoken to the earth." And to-day only the Old World peasants held the key.

Except—— He glanced up sharply. There sat the woman—this woman who had butted into his life. She was quietly sewing, making a collar of raw muskrat fur for his old overcoat. David had brought in the

skins. Here she sat, content, making into garments the booty of the male. Like a squaw. She did everything in that brisk contented way, whether it was feeding the chickens, gathering wild berries, or nursing a sick sheep. Never had she known country life until a few months ago, and yet she had slid up close to the soil at once, had nestled against it. As though *she* knew the secret—intuitively, by virtue of some love that is knowledge without acquirement. As though *she* "spoke."

Hamlin had said, "You (of to-day) will be the torch bearers. You've got to give your shove in turn, the shove that keeps evolution moving on."

Vic's pipe was empty. He sat sucking at it, making a bottle-like noise. A shove. Evolution. As if a fellow had a responsibility. He wondered: *did* it matter? Again he asked, "What's it all for, anyhow? What's the big idea?"

But it was queer, how comfortable it felt, with her sitting there, sewing at that collar.

§

The worst strain came in spring when winter did not depart. Snow would thaw, then freeze to gray slabs of ice; skies hung like dark blankets; the Chinook had come, fooled the world with hope, and fled, leaving weeks of raw bitter cold that was all the more intolerable for the vanished hope.

Feed had to be bought, a depressing expenditure, and the prosperous Malmberg puffed out his thick Swedish lip and named an outrageous price—take it or leave it! Vic swore and drove off—to another farmer, an unprosperous little Belgian, who charged more. There was nothing for it but to pay the price. The sheep had to be tided over somehow.

Lessons were abandoned: the harassing problem of carrying on was all-important now. Snow had broken down the roof of the lambing pen which Vic had put in fine order before winter set in.

"Fool I was not to wait." He swore from the depths of the muskrat collar, beat aching hands to limber them enough to wield a hammer, and dug his way through rocky masses of re-frozen snow out to the pen which was soon to be needed for the small newcomers. Lambing time almost here, and winter still hanging, thick, threatening.

§

Effie at last grew fractious. She ceased to sing; she carried work burdensomely, looking at an especially heavy pail, an especially large washing, as if they were abusing her. One day she stamped into the house in a pet, squaring her mouth like a child about to howl.

"It's that Mrs. Malmberg! Ol' stinker!"

Vic knew that it was not the mentor of the White Flower of a Blameless Life Society to whom Effie referred, but a Plymouth Rock hen whose bust develop-

ment was so imposing as to have won for her the name of that stately sovereign.

"What's she done?"

"Bit me again." Effie sucked her right third finger in passionate commiseration.

"Told you about a hundred times hens don't bite."

"*She* does."

"You're a little fool."

"All right. I am, then. But I saw her teeth when she opened her mouth. She hates me. An' I hate her. I hate 'em all. I hate every hen in the world. I hate the whole ranch."

"Then why don't you——"

He stopped short. Across the bleak, cramped room in the solitary log shanty at the bottom of a dead-and-gone ocean, they stared. He might as well have finished the sentence; might as well have asked her aloud why she didn't go. They kept on staring, seemingly at each other, in reality at the thought that had risen between them. Each was wondering why he, why she, why the other did not snap that bond which was no bond. At that moment they believed that they hated each other.

§

It was into the midst of this period, when nerves were drawn to a long, thin, shrill tension that vibrated with torment—into the midst of this that Effie's letter came.

§

She had never before had a letter from the R. F. D. box. Vic brought it in, ink-stained by snow, and handed it to her with a stormy brow, as though the receiving of a letter were an inexcusable impudence on her part.

"S'pose you think you're some class, having a correspondent," he snorted.

She turned the letter over and over, marvelling. He flung out to the pen.

At length, after much vain study of the letter's exterior, Effie took the paring knife out of the pan of turnips and cut the flap. Still she frowned in perplexity; still she marvelled, breathless, full of fascinating little cold and hot sensations: misgivings, hopes.

"Why, it's from Mr. Handy!" she cried, turning to the signature.

Mr. Handy! The one really grand person who had figured in her Newark life. The owner of the little prosperous grocery, who talked of the weather and told her that he never failed to change his underwear each year on his departed sister's birthday, April 17th. One who so tenderly commemorated a sister's anniversary would surely be ever a kindly mate in the home. And Mr. Handy was rich, by Effie's standards; and rather good-looking and very well dressed: truly personable.

"How'd he ever know where I was at?" she gasped in astonishment.

She read; the letter explained. Mr. Handy had been

giving himself a long-earned vacation in the fall, going all the way to the Rockies, and on a Pullman car he had chanced, oddly enough, to become acquainted with the honeymooning Mr. and Mrs. Pinker. The discovery had been made that they all knew Effie; he had learned her story, had dwelt upon it, and now, once more in his lonely flat above the grocery, had come to a resolve.

§

"Ime writing to ast you to be my wife. You know how I mean, everything straight, with a ring as big as they make em. Ime a good man. I ant meaning to throw bouquetts at myself but you know what I mean. I doant drink or stay out nights. Ime steady and Ile be good to you and make you a good home. I always wanted you and bygons is bygons and no questions ast."

§

Effie read it over and over. The picture of Mr. Handy in his home rose warm before her eyes, filling her with inexpressible comfort. His flat was commodious, well furnished, heated; to her, luxurious. He was, as he said, "steady"; years of thrift had acquired a neat capital, his business thrived, and he was liberal. She knew that with him she would have abundance, freedom, affection, kindness—in short, a "grand life."

All these things, laughed at and tossed away when he had offered them to her audacious, reckless youth of a few months ago, now rose like a haven of peace and plenty before the eyes of a storm-beaten mariner.

§

All day Vic was out at the lambing pen. He went without dinner, working to get it into shape for the new creatures soon to be. The ewes hung heavy, their time was almost come.

All day Effie remained in the house, and the letter was like a torch to her brain. Here: chilling dishwater, wind whistling through chinks between logs, barren furnishings, a floor that was ice to her aching feet, importunate chickens, ceaseless drudgery. There: luxury, the life of a princess.

Thoughts like fire. Leaping, flaming thoughts, making conflagration in her brain. Images tumbling over one another in their haste to entice. In them she saw the sleekly prosperous Mr. Handy arriving in a car, elegantly assisting her into it; they drove off to the minister's. . . . "Here! I made a reservation for the first drawing room. Here, porter! The drawing room!" . . . Porter tapping at drawing-room door —obsequious, grinning. . . . Pink and brown ice cream with square corners. . . . Crumpled bills. Mr. Handy saying, "The change? Oh, forget it!"

. . . Arriving in New York. A taxi. A week at the Biltmore before taking up Newark life. . . . The gold band, thick, shiny, potent; bulwark of defense forevermore against the White Flowers of a Blameless Life. . . .

So the thoughts burned on in her hot head. Hours, hours. Daylight waned. She roused, found the lamp unfilled, the fire out.

She went to the window to draw the curtain for the night, an old habit of city life which had never been thrown off. In the gray dusk she saw Vic coming; so weary that he walked like an old man, so cold that, despite his preposterous height, he looked shrunken, like a sheep in a storm. He was wet; she remembered that there was a pool of melted ice in the pen, where he had been obliged to stand and work, and his boots leaked, and all her coaxing had failed to induce him to spend the money for new ones.

She went to the door, opened it. He glanced toward her, more weary than morose.

Suddenly Effie ran forward, out into the cold, through the snow. She reached up to his broad shoulders, gathered him into her arms like a mother. He started, frowned, but did not pull away.

"Vicky!" she murmured, and the murmur rose to a sob. She laid her cheek against his shabby old coat, pressed hard against it. "Vicky!"

Then she ran back to the house. That was all. But as she kindled a new fire with the letter, her cheeks

flamed, not from the sticks' blaze. It was as though she had caught herself listening to a guilty proposal; as though, in that offer of legal marriage, a life of prostitution had for the moment tempted her with its glamorous promise.

XXI

§

APRIL advanced, and still spring held off. March-like, the days and nights blustered past. Lambing was due to begin late in the month. Vic hovered over the ewes in a breathless suspense that would have won the scornful amusement of any old sheep man; those who reckoned by the "dozen o' thousand" had no time to regard the individual loss. The weaklings they would cast aside, to be picked up by some beggar of sheep, who would build a tiny flock of the unwanted and nurse them up to a handicapped life; only the pick among the thousands were worth the big men's keeping. But in Trench's small band each birth was an event.

Over and over he counted, as he grouped the ewes. "Twenty-one weeks. That bunch'll be coming on by the first of May. These, a little later. Gosh, got to be careful *now*. If they get crowded, or do too much jumping or shoving, they'll cast, sure. Like last year. I don't get caught that way again—watch *me*. When it gets nearer time, I'll have 'em all in the pen so's not to take chances. . . . Hundred and forty-seven days. . . ."

He went about muttering his instructions to himself. The care sat heavy upon him, but beneath it lay bright anticipation. The pen was ready, in flawless order; no ward in a maternity hospital could have been given more thought in preparation. He fussed over each detail like a meticulous nurse.

"Say, Vicky, hospital where my sister went to get her baby, they had a radio to ent'tain 'em while they was waiting. Them ewes might enjoy listening-in," Effie bantered.

"Hh!" he snorted. She had known that he would snort. "Hh!" But she knew, too, that there was a silent chuckle behind his scowl. Effie had secrets with herself; she gave herself many a wink at the scoffs and angers of man.

The outlook was nothing short of brilliant. All the ewes, despite the hard winter, were in magnificent health. The many ailments of last year had magically disappeared from the flock; now every condition was perfect. He'd pay off the big loans and be well on the way toward clearing all debt. Lambs, and lambs, and lambs. He whistled as he went about his work. He sang a hoarse bumble. A psalm, was that guttural "Tipperary." A pæan. A triumphant chant.

The ewes hung heavy, heavier.

§

On a Monday in April, David came in to dinner saying:

"I'm goin' take the band to that holluh by the red butte. Goin' snow by an hour."

Vic looked up quickly at the yellow oiliness that was creeping over the heavy gray sky. Even at that moment a flurry of flakes spattered the window; another, and the air was full.

He groaned. This was past endurance. The men left their dinner. David ran out to the sheep while Vic hurried to see that the shelter was ready in case of need. Ten minutes later the boy came running to him.

"That ol' blue ewe!" he cried. He was ashy with alarm. "She's droppin' it *now!*"

§

The old blue ewe, far ahead of time, was in the throes of delivery. The flock had crowded violently at the coming of the sudden storm, and she must have been pushed among them unmercifully. There, on the open plain, she was giving birth to her lamb, whimpering queerly, while the flock looked on in stolid indifference. She seemed to be crying softly to her offspring, as though begging it to live. The lamb, however, was already dead—swollen, as though it had been dead for some time. She made a few anxious attempts to lick it; she seemed to hope that her mother touch might bring it to life; then fell into an ague.

The old black gloom of earlier days descended upon Vic. This—the opening chapter of the year's great

story, that toward which months of patient and soul-racking labour had tended. This, the proud climax of devoted toil and straining hope. A stillborn lamb, and the ewe sick unto death.

He gave the lamb's lifeless body a kick into the arroyo. "Leave the ewe where she is—she'll die," he said in the ruthless cruelty of despair. "They'll all die." With head sunk, he walked away from the band, plodded on, aimlessly, into the storm.

But David brought the old blue ewe to the pen and made her a warm drink of flaxseed gruel, talking to her the while—Polish talk. He did not coddle her; he handled her none too gently, and his words were rough. But she ceased her sounds of suffering, she turned to him trusting eyes. They understood each other. David had sprung from Old World peasants; he could ask the beasts and they would teach him, he could speak to the things of earth.

§

Two hours later another ewe cast her lamb. Her time had not come, and the lamb was feeble, but when Vic blew into its nostrils the small breath fluttered and took up the task of living—a hard duty, but one which must at least be attempted.

The mother seemed exhausted from her struggles in the storm, and gazed blankly at her offspring when they brought it to her. She showed no inclination to attend

to her maternal duty. David sprinkled a pinch of salt upon its head and flank, and presently she stretched forth a tentative tongue, gave an indifferent lick, then roused. They left her cleansing the small beast diligently.

"Not a chance in a hundred the lamb'll live, though," Vic muttered blackly. "They'll all cast now—all over the place—stillborn lambs, lambs ahead o' time—and the ewes—they'll all die. Everything wiped out."

He muttered it to the snowy plain as he went about. He worked, now in a burst of furious despair, again sinking into a dull, plodding drudgery. But he never ceased to work. He seemed to take a sort of defiant satisfaction in showing the Fates that he was doing *his* part; in putting *them* in the wrong.

Day waned, night fell. Still the snow beat. The mothers-to-be were gathered in the lambing pen where they would not be subject to the shoving of the storm-driven flock. But the cold pierced. In spite of all his precautions, there were cracks where snow sifted through the walls of the pen, and the poor pregnant beasts cowered forlornly. Such weather, in their condition, was a dire menace.

Vic returned late. Effie had put on her pinkest apron, and she was wearing it perkily. There was no perkiness, however, in her soul.

"We got 'n 'omelette to-night, Vicky," she cried. Her voice broke, but she coughed to cover it, and gave an anticipatory whirl to the egg beater. She did not

mention the sheep. But she searched his face, trying to learn the fate of the old blue ewe.

When David came she whispered to him,

"Is she alive?"

"Yeh, but I dunno if she will be by mornin'. An' the lamb 't come this aft'noon's pretty bad."

Effie beat the eggs violently. She knew that it was not these individual losses that were causing Vic to despair, but the sense of ill omen which they bore. The winter had been successful, but now misfortune had set in. He felt that luck had once more turned against him, that all was lost. His unspoken thought seemed to take form, like a material object; it was a millstone, weighing them both down, crushing, overwhelming. As Effie drew the pan of biscuits from the oven she found them collapsed, flat, and heavy. The very biscuits despaired.

The omelette was eaten by David alone, at a silent table. Neither Effie nor Vic could summon an appetite for any food. Their hope, so high hearted, so dearly cherished, was of a sudden washed away as ruthlessly and completely as a chip by the tide.

"They'll all cast, any minute now," he was muttering fiercely as he flung himself into bed. "Lambs'll be born dead. Ewe's'll die of inflammation. Won't be a live one among 'em." He found a bitter relish in saying it over, in cursing the Fates for their injustice.

Effie, silent and miserable, crept in on her side and smothered a sob in the hard pillow.

XXII

§

DAVID was obliged to go home that night. Early Tuesday morning Vic hurried out to the pen; there was no change in the two sick animals. They barely clung to life.

When David returned he went directly to the house where he found Effie alone. Evidently disturbed, he stood nervously twirling his cap between his hands.

"Say, Mis' Trench."

"Well, Davy?" It was like lifting a dead weight to throw cheer into her manner.

"Say, I come by Mis' Coty's," he began, and stopped, very red.

Effie was crowding her bobbed mop into a sweeping cap. She was going to sweep until she ached. Physical exhaustion, instinct told her, would be her one refuge. "An' how's Mrs. Coty?"

"She—she——" At last he blurted it out. "She's goin' to git a baby—to-day."

"David! Did they get the doctor?"

"No. That's just it. Ain't nobody. Coty's got lambin' on, an' he's out to the pen. He says he's gotta get them lambs through, no matter what."

Effie gasped. The incredibility of this land of isolation! This man—leaving his wife in her birth pangs that he might aid the ewes in theirs. . . .

"Davy! You mean she's *all alone?*"

"Sure. An' Ma can't go, 'cause she's sick in bed. Say, Mis' Trench—did you——" He halted, stared at his boots. "Did you ever——"

"No, Davy, I never did. My sister always had 'em in hospital. But I'll go."

§

Vic came in and was told. He swore.

"What about dinner? And supper? S'pose Dave and I can work like dogs all day, then go without meals, can we? You can't get to Coty's, anyhow. Roads are all to pieces."

"You won't go without meals. There's a big crock o' beans I baked yest'day, an' there's new bread, an' pies, an' all you gotta do's open a can o' beef. An' Davy neenta drive me over!—I'll take the horse an' ride. I'm going right away." She couldn't deny herself a feminine parting shot: "Thought you liked it all by yourself, 'thout any woman butting in," she observed with trenchant mildness.

Vic swore again, but she went briskly about her preparations, bundling herself warmly, pouring some soup into a glass sealer. He stamped off, out to the pen again, without a good-bye. Alone, she mounted astride and started. The snow had ceased to fall during the

night, but roads were barely discernible, and the cold was still intense.

Nothing but the thought of Mrs. Coty kept up her courage as the way grew colder, wearier. She breathed on her hands, beat them. . . . Mrs. Coty—alone in her house. . . . She slapped her aching cheeks. . . . Mrs. Coty—perhaps already in torture, perhaps at death's door, perhaps—— No, she wouldn't let herself think *that*, because if she had, she would have turned around.

Mrs. Coty was one of Effie's few friends. She was a Belgian who, alone with her husband, lived on a small dry-farm. This would be her eighth child. And not one did she have. The older ones had scattered; the younger had died. How the woman longed for one in her home! Several times she had gone through nine long months of hope, and then had come a little candle flame, flaring for an instant, extinguished almost as soon as lighted.

Oh, why wouldn't the horse hurry? Effie knew she was going to freeze to death, here on the plain, alone. . . . Mrs. Coty, Mrs. Coty. . . . Oh, she couldn't stand it another minute. . . .

The Belgians' little house, painted bright blue, shot up like a larkspur through the snow.

§

"Come—een."

Effie heard the feeble reply to her knock. She en-

tered. Halted. The room, once tiny, all at once became vast to her fear. It was dusky, and the woman's voice came from far back in the duskiest corner.

"Ahh! Mees' Trench! You!" There was utter disappointment in that "you." Effie knew instinctively that the woman had hoped for a more competent visitor.

Mrs. Coty's drawn face lay upon the far-off pillow. It had always reminded Effie of a witch's face; now the hawk profile, the black wisps of straggling hair lay in relief against the white.

The room was immaculate and ugly, save for one thing: as Effie's eyes fell upon this she forgot, for the moment, her own fear. It was a bedspread of hand-made lace. There upon that golden-oak mail-order bed it lay, a marvel wrought in exquisite mesh—scrolls, knots, tiny bands as crafty as those of a spider; coils, ropes, conventionalized flowers woven in one lovely fretwork, mingled and interwoven in such cunning as only a Belgian lace-maker knows. A gem of Old World art in this uncouth house on a barren American plain. Later, Effie was to learn that it was an heirloom, made by Mrs. Coty's grandmother, brought by the witch across an ocean and two thirds of a continent and treasured as the one link with that other life. . . .

Effie's eyes travelled back to the woman's face, and her fear returned.

"I—I came to help," she stammered. She saw her own left thumb; it was shaking. Panic had seized her.

The eyes seemed to pierce forth from beneath eaves. "Ahh! What you know? You ever see?"

The same that David had wondered. A sense of her own ignorance and futility overwhelmed Effie. She felt a useless child. What could *she* do in this dire necessity?

"I—I don't know much. I brought you some soup." Still Effie stood close to the door, clinging to its knob, staring toward that faraway vast immaculate bed, and the dark witch face peering from it.

"Ahhh!" Mrs. Coty gave a long groan and writhed.

"Oh!" breathed Effie, "what can I do?" She clung to the doorknob, as though it could rescue her.

Mrs. Coty commanded herself. "Damn them sheeps," she said gently. "They haf go get lamb same time me. Coty he confine me every time. Seven time he done it. He know. He good horse doctor. But he say, 'I can't take chance lose one lamb.' He go pen. What I do?"

She waited, while another throe overcame her, passed. She mused aloud.

"Seven time. All gone. If I no get baby this time, I bust heart. I die, me. I got nobody help. What I do?"

She was overcome by her alarm. The hope to which she had clung for nine months was already dashed. With only an ignorant girl to care for her, surely the baby could not be expected to live. She began to cry, like a dog that whimpers, in miserable squeaks.

Then all at once she pulled herself together. She turned from her own agony of mind and body—to Effie. She saw her youth, her helplessness, her panic.

"Poor leetle thing!" she cried, and reached out a corded dark hand. "You so scare, ain't? Don't be scare, leetle child. I take care o' you. I show you how. Poor leetle thing!"

Effie's nerves snapped in a sob. She ran to the bed, buried her head in it. The woman reached out between her pains and stroked the bob.

"Gee! *You* to be comforting *me!*" Effie shook herself, jumped up. "An' *I* come to help *you!*" She scolded herself vigorously, threw off hat and coat, pushed up her sleeves. "Now!" she said, her chin up. She set her lips in sharp determination. "This baby's going to live!" she declared. "You tell me what to do, and I'll——"

But there was no reply now, not even those doglike whimpers. Only a dreadful locked silence. The black hour had begun.

Effie fought. As the hours went on, she felt it to be a preparation.

XXIII

§

IT WAS two days later, Thursday. Effie had not returned. Still there was no improvement in the two sick animals, and another ewe showed signs of casting. Vic recalled seeing her jump across a wide gully the day of the storm, rashly following the frantic leader.

"That jump did it," he gloomed. "Another one's going. And they'll keep on. There won't be one of 'em all go her full time. They'll all cast. And die." Over and over he was saying it, like a refrain.

David returned from his dinner in the house and took over the charge. Vic went slowly to his own meal. Still he said it. Over and over. It tasted acrid and delicious upon his lips.

Effie's supplies, set forth in appetizing array on Tuesday, were growing low. David had demolished most of the food, and disorder reigned on table and stove. She had put out a pie on a rose-sprinkled paper doily: its crust flaky, the colour of ripe wheat; she had left the crock full of beans at the back of the stove. Now the first pie had vanished, another had been

hewed, crumbs lay everywhere, unwashed pans stood about, the doily was smeared.

Vic looked at the ravished table and turned away. Coffee. That was all he could swallow. That would buck him up, maybe.

The coffee was black and strong, but it gave him no relief. He drained the cup three times. Then he remained, sitting beside the table, head sunk, hands fallen loose upon his open knees. It was the old posture of despair. His will had again become powerless to rouse him. Gloom seized upon him like a drug, it crept swiftly through his veins, numbing, paralyzing. He abandoned himself to its narcosis; he did not stir. . . .

His pipe. Automatically came the impulse to light it. Matches—in the table drawer. Heavily he opened it, fumbled for them. . . . As he joggled the drawer, something long hidden in its farthest corner slid forward. . . . Cold, slippery, it touched his hand, pressed it like an old friend. He knew the contact. . . . The old toy. . . . He snatched up the forgotten derringer, stared at its gleaming pearl.

As he looked at it, he stiffened. The drugged sensation vanished from his numb limbs and brain. He was taut now with resolve. He sprang up, mechanically thrust his arms into the old overcoat sleeves, pushed his cap down over his eyes. The derringer he stowed in a pocket.

§

Vic did not take the path to the pen where he had been at work with David. Instead, he set off to the northeast, passing the pen at a distance. He strode; determinedly, fast, as though hurrying to reach a goal. Still that resolve drew him taut from head to foot.

He had taken the river trail. It was obliterated to strange eyes, but he knew the way well. He reached the river. Along its bank the cottonwoods were gathered, gaunt with winter; they threw up their lean arms in maniacal gestures, as though to greet him. The spot was solitary as death; only a tiny rabbit track had broken the snow. The river lay throttled in the hold of ice.

He paused. As he looked at the trees, their arms seemed to wave, to greet him with beckonings, as though summoning him to their company of death. He reached into his pocket.

XXIV

§

IN THE little blue house of the Belgians Effie had fought all of Tuesday. Mrs. Coty was very sick. Coty had not once returned from his work with the sheep. He had remained to cleanse udders, to assist in delivery. There had been a bad case, an unnatural presentation; it had been necessary to use the knife upon the lamb in order to preserve the ewe. Coty was something of a veterinarian; he worked with the utmost skill and care, sacrificing the lamb as a last resort to save the mother.

"Ah!" he breathed at last, after long anxious labour. "She is safe! My best! It is bad that the lamb must go, but I still have my finest ewe!"

He patted her head, in the emotionalism of the Belgian. He was glowing; he mopped his brow, damp from straining anxiety, he smiled in proud delight. By dint of all his expertness, all his tender pains, he had brought this mother through the perils of childbirth.

§

It was after dark when he reached his little blue door. Effie, tiptoeing, met him.

"Sh! They're asleep!"

"Ah!" Coty lowered his voice and excitedly questioned: "They! Eet ees live baby, yes? Boy?"

"Yeh. Boy. It's a grand one, too. Look out! Don't you wake her up! She's been turrible sick."

Coty's smile stretched to his ears. Clumsily he stole to the bed, bent over it. The witch face lay still against the pillow. Mrs. Coty was spent with pain, but even in her sleep some flicker as of light seemed to play over her face. Against her slept the baby. It was, as Effie had correctly stated, a grand one.

Coty gloated for long moments. Then he turned to Effie.

"I mek grand boy!" he boasted.

Effie's tension gave way. She could repress herself no longer.

"A darn lot you had to do with it!" she snapped. "I hope Mrs. Coty'll tell you who made that baby! She better let you know where you get off!"

§

On Thursday afternoon Effie went home. She felt that she could safely leave at last. Mrs. Coty was recovering, a Belgian friend had arrived to care for her, and the baby was thriving like a weed. At last there was to be a child in the little blue house.

Effie rode back through a fresh mild air that promised spring. She pressed the horse. It had gone hard with her to leave Vic in his despair so long, and now she was

filled with anxious haste. But the blitheness of the day reassured her for the time. The sun was shining, snow was melting on the tops of buttes, running down in little streams that caught the light and twinkled. She sang a snatch; then she fell to thinking of the Coty household.

It was her first knowledge of what maternity means in this lonely world. A world where the physician is a rare luxury, where even the midwife barely exists. Where a man many a time delivers his own wife or a boy his mother; where any chance neighbour, male or female, may be called in to assist; where stock comes first, wife second, in the perils of childbirth.

It was all strange and amazing to Effie. She looked back upon the picture she had left. A beaming father; a mother haggard from pain, witchlike against the pillow, her black wisps of hair brushing that small red monkey-like countenance. Hands no bigger than bird claws feeling their way to her breast—strange, innate skill in self-preservation. . . .

All at once the woman had roused from sleep, and she and the man had met in a long embrace. His dirty hands had fumbled at her wispy hair. She had smiled. She cherished no grudge for his neglect. To her it was all a matter of course. Stock first, wife second.

They were poverty-stricken Old World peasants, striving to win sustenance from this surly soil. They were not more noble, or more righteous, in spite of being poor and humble, than others. But they *had* something,

Effie dimly realized, that few of our people have. They lived closer, somehow, to the heart of things. Beasts, the soil, birth, death—all in the passing, all simply accepted, without questioning. The earth had borne them, and in the end she would be the last to tuck them in and tell them good-night. They knew her, they accepted her as the mother; they were satisfied with her decree. They *spoke*—spoke to the earth.

§

Thursday afternoon. Two days Effie had been gone! She did hope the beans and bread and pies had lasted through.

"Gee, I gotta get busy to-morrow!" she reflected. "I gotta bake all day to ketch up! Bet that pantry's cleaned out."

David was near the house, and he came forward to help her and to learn the news.

"The grandest ever. She named him Benjamin—says that means to get a kid for your right hand. How's our sheep? Where's Vic?"

"Dunno where he is. The lamb an' the ewe's jus' the same—don't git well, don't die."

"Did you men have 'nough to eat? . . . Where *is* Vic, anyhow?"

"Dunno where he went. He come out after dinner an' went down that trail, to the river."

"That's funny." She was pulling off her thick

gloves, unbuttoning her beaver jacket at the door. She turned, frowning anxiously.

The river. What could Vic be doing at the river? A vision of the lonely ice-bound bank rose ominously before her eyes. Until now he had been unwilling to leave his sick animals, had hovered over them almost constantly. Why had he deserted?

The river. Some evil spell seemed cast by the very word. How grimly that winter stream with its locked lips would guard a secret!

She felt her breath say, "Hark!" while her heart stood still to listen. She could not speak or move through that fog of impending calamity.

Then, beyond David, beyond the pen, far down the trail, she saw Vic approaching.

§

He had carried out his resolve to the letter. Taut and determined, he had gone directly to the river, had walked out upon its roof of ice. There, where the stream beneath was deepest and strongest, he had broken a hole and into it had dropped the derringer. It fell with a *plop-plup*. The sound was *finis*. Buried beyond recall, he had put the chosen tool and symbol of escape from his hands forever. Somehow he had never found it possible to think of any other means; so fixed had been the idea, that escape to him meant this small weapon or none. To part with it was a final and

conclusive rite. . . . He turned on his heel, shrugged, and went back to mix gruel for the sick sheep.

"Going to try if oatmeal won't do better than flaxseed," he muttered to himself.

"Mis' Trench's got back," David told him as they met at the pen.

"Hh," was Vic's only response.

Just then the sick ewe caught their attention. She was no longer cowering in misery; she was sitting up with an air of lively interest.

"Gosh, if she isn't getting well!" Vic exclaimed.

David stepped to the other side of the partition, where the sick lamb was kept.

"Say! This un's gittin' well, too!" he shouted.

§

There were no more premature births. Soon lambing began properly. Vic and David worked by day and sometimes by night; they hovered over their cases, they watched and nursed as though human lives hung in the balance. Often during those days of early May they could not leave to come in for their meals; Effie would trudge out to the pen with a pail of steaming coffee and a basket of thick heartening sandwiches of meat and mustard to warm the soul and the stomach of man.

The poor little maternity hospital would have seemed

a pitiful enough affair to the big sheep men of old, with their vast pens, their crew operating under the "lambing boss," their crop of baby woollies running into the thousands. But to Vic the affair was a mighty climax —amazing, the happenings now.

Bad luck, it turned out, had but grazed his little band and passed by. Now nothing but success attended the births. Here twins—there one alone, big and hearty—twins again—more twins. Only one malformed lamb, and that the liveliest of the lot.

As the days went on, each confinement held the suspense of tensest drama. Such solicitous individual care would have amused a Westerner. One ewe was three days behind her time; Vic could not eat when the third anxious day came. Ought he to do something? . . . Then a male infant, uncommonly vigorous and wicked, was born. . . . Once a little foreleg appeared bent backwards—breathless worry—but no harm in the end. . . . Three weak lambs—they must be wrapped in hot cloths and fed their mothers' milk with a spoon.

"Where's the whisky?" he demanded, running to the house.

"Rattlesnake?" Effie exclaimed in alarm.

"Rattlesnake nothing. That lamb needs it."

Milk punch, warm and pungent. A highly pleased lamb, guzzling it like a born enemy of the Eighteenth Amendment.

It was all marvellous, triumphant. As Vic had once dreamed, it was lambs and lambs and lambs. Dozens of them. Healthy and happy, nuzzling at the bellies of their dams, feeding to fatness, wide-awake and curious concerning the world. One ewe died, and her infant was reared on cow's milk given in a bottle; Effie went into ecstasies when she saw its funny mouth seek and close over the rubber nipple. She was reduced to the verge of tears next minute when David showed her a ewe that persisted in butting instead of nourishing her offspring.

"Whatever'll you do to her?"

"Give her a halter." Shocking, that a mother must be thus coerced to show affection! She was the only unkind member of the flock.

Effie lingered at the pen. There was a hominess about it. . . . Evening falling, the pen sinking to twilight, to dusk, to dark. Ewes and lambs, close cuddled. Ugly little mouths, feeling for teats. Soft, maternal noises. Sleep, content. . . . "Ask now the beasts." . . . It was as though Effie and the ewes understood, as though they had a secret together. . . .

Vic, weary to his last resource, a heap of exhaustion, smoked by the living-room fire. All done. Success, victory. The biggest debts would be cleared, the rest would be easy.

Effie entered. She stole to him, laid a hand on his shoulder. He did not shrug it off. He let it lie there.

"Vicky——"

"Hh?"

Sheer joy choked her. "Vicky—isn't—isn't it—oh, my lollipop, isn't it all *grand?*"

"Might be worse," he grunted. Still, he let her hand lie where it was.

XXV

§

IT WAS full spring at last.

The surrendered earth, bridelike, opened her breast. Along the river the young green of cottonwoods stung sharply; ambushed beauties stabbed one from the shadows of interlaced evergreens and shrubs—here the flashing purity of a dogtooth violet, there the sudden blush of azalea. Wherever the river trod there trailed a glory of swathing colour, lovely draperies clinging to the lines of her willowy form.

Beyond lay the open plain; but it was not bleak now. Its long nudation had vanished; the upspringing grass shone, whipped by the sun to a froth of glittering green. There were gay tossings; a handful of yellow buttercups, a sprinkle of blue-eyes, now a spilling of palest flushing anemones, again a thrown apronful of white star-flowers.

The very buttes seemed to don spring raiment. Never before had their wealth of colour been so lavish. Brick-red bands paled to rose, deepened again to the red of blood. A stripe once tawny seemed, in the newly washed sunlight, to warm to golden brown, to burnt orange. Pastel tints of pearl and mauve were enriched

by the light to royal blue and hyacinthine; everywhere, among these colours of clay and rock, were grass-covered bands of emerald, now at the year's height of splendour. Across one of them, between its colours, a band of dusky flame glowed, dull by day, vivid by night; the coal had caught fire, and the butte was slowly burning.

Carried on the coquetting spring wind came fragrances. A wild rose, born ahead of its time, in the loneliness of the prophetic life gave forth its message rather sadly, as though knowing that there were none yet to receive it. A clump of violets, nurtured by Mrs. Coty's magic Belgian touch, defied the Bad Lands to starve out their grace and their perfume.

The lambs' behaviour was Biblical: they skipped, like little hills; and the calf also, like Lebanon and Sirion and a young unicorn. Effie was impressed by the interesting fact that lambs have no helpless infancy. They were born; presto, they became active children almost at once, running about on capable legs, keeping up with the band, pestering their mothers, getting into mischief, travelling, pranking, misbehaving, rollicking.

All other creatures, too, had their young. The chicks ran about like dynamic primroses risen from vegetable to animal estate. Tiny prairie dogs' startled young eyes glittered beadily at an unknown and thrilling world; alarmed, one would scuttle back to the protective body of its sow-shaped mother, huddling against her gross flesh for safety; only to dart forth again in ardent desire to learn more of the terrifying, fascinating experience

called life. New-born gophers scurried, the magpie's children whimpered under raucous maternal scoldings, prairie chickens and curlews and meadow larks and coyotes and beavers and pretty little spotted skunks were all busy reproducing their kind.

§

Ranch affairs had settled into a small but even prosperity. The sale of some older members of the flock had given Vic cash in hand to ease matters until the profits from shearing and larger marketing should be reaped. The lambing crisis was well over, ewes had come happily through the maternal ordeal, lambs were gambolling incorrigibly, four-legged emblems of success. "Two legs o' lamb apiece, two shoulders o' lamb, two loins," Effie would calculate in profound satisfaction. And yet she would call them "the cuties," and mend their wounds and nurse their ails with the yearning croons of a mother and tears on her lashes, while she pressed kisses into their dirty wool. The braided stream of human impulses made her at once the most tender-hearted and the most practical of helpmeets.

§

Summer opened with the remodelled sheep wagon flaunting its fresh white canvas like a new sail agleam upon a naked ocean. Vic swelled with pride when he equipped it: a new stove, chair, table, bunk, cupboard.

Effie cushioned the chair and made ruffled white curtains for the peephole, and hung bright cretonne over the shelves, and stood off to gaze and wring her hands over its perfection.

Excursions began; as yet they were brief; the long journeys would come later. But Vic would go for two or three days out where the grass was more abundant and the sheep, gluttonous in the bracing air, could feed to their piggish content. David Olefsky was at the ranch to help Effie.

David was no longer hired by the day as occasion demanded. He was the "regular man." Vic revelled in the sensation. He ordered the boy about gruffly, relishing the obedience that met his orders, savouring the delectable moment each week when he reached into his pocket and paid his man. It was his first taste of established employerhood, and its sense of power intoxicated him. And yet, where to many a man the intoxication would have lain in holding power over a human being, to Vic, although he did not know it, the power gained over himself was the source of satisfaction. Not because he ruled David, but because he had put himself on a self-respecting basis of achievement, was he proud.

And David sensed the difference. He would have resented tyranny, he would have been no master's slave; but Trench, although churlish and brusque of manner, nevertheless, felt no inequality; he treated the relation as that of two men on a level, in a business deal. He

was devoid of feudalism; and he demanded no effort that he was not willing to double himself.

Long before, when the work was intermittent, old Olefsky had protested to his son.

"Why you no go 'Noleum, get job all time? This work Trench no good. Two day work, five day loaf, one day work, two week loaf."

"Don't care. I want to work for Vic Trench. Maybe some day he'll git where he kin keep me. Ain't another man treats a boy like he's *the same*. . . . She's all right, too. We swap songs."

§

Again Effie was taken on a wagon trip. No bride honeymooning in a private car ever experienced keener excitement. To cook over the shiny stove, to lounge in the cushioned chair, to peep through the crisp and speckless curtains, to sleep in the new bunk! She slept less than at home. It was too palpitating a delight to lie awake and pretend that she was the heroine of "The Covered Wagon" and that she heard distant war whoops descending. Once she visualized the delicious peril so vividly and held the picture so long that she gave an involuntary scream. It woke Vic and he said, "Damn," when he learned the cause of the disturbance.

But breakfast atoned. When he came back to the wagon after attending to the sheep and found sour-milk

pancakes, bubbly and springy as sponges, he overlooked the night's incident.

"Might be worse," he admitted to Effie who waited, flushed and eager, for judgment upon the cakes. It had come; it was uncommonly generous. She went about the day's housekeeping with far more satisfaction than many a wife finds in a eulogy.

§

David came riding toward them, waving a letter.

Vic read it, and explained briefly, "From Bill. Says that man's in town—one that's getting up the coöperative cars. I'd better go."

The man was a worker allied with the county agent in an effort to protect the small ranchers' products from the robbery of middlemen. The two were arranging to market the cattle and sheep of these producers on a coöperative basis, so that an honest profit should remain for each, and Vic had been interested in the possibility of entering into the plan.

"Sure, Vicky," Effie agreed heartily. "You go quick's you can. That county plan looks to me like a million dollars. I get my silk sports costumes from Fi'th Avenue from now on—some class in the sheep wagon."

"Hh! . . . You can come back to the house now, and David'll stay out here. I've got to be gone overnight."

She cast a yearning gaze at the wagon and its bewildering charms.

"Vicky! Lemme stay here! I'm not afraid to be alone. David can go back to the ranch, an' I'll look after the sheep. I won't let anything happen to 'em, truly I won't. Please, Vicky!"

§

Remarkably, he had let her stay—to spend the night alone, out on the plain in the wagon. He had trusted the sheep to her, with only Blighty and the gun for aides. She could fire enough to frighten off a beast of prey, although she would never learn to hit a mark; she always feared the weapon and waited in dread for the instant of the explosion.

But there were no wild beasts around now, she would not have to fire. She could rest in peace with Blighty and the sheep. The dog, the flock, the wagon: they spelled home.

§

A long golden afternoon. Sheep browsing, strolling, pausing to browse again. Lambs taking to their sinful heels, playing hookey, suddenly, in a panic at nothing at all, running back with frantic blats to the mothers from whom they had gleefully escaped. Maternal chidings, maternal coddlings. Long pinky-gray tongue administering a severe licking to an impertinent young face. Lazy hours, scolding, loving, quarrelling, making up. Epitome of content. Epitome of human happiness expressed by sheep.

Twilight. Effie cooking her evening meal. Slender spiral of smoke rising from the wagon's pipe. She and Blighty eating supper. How he hovered about her with yearning eyes and squeaks of devotion, knowing himself her only guardian! She had sternly to send him back to the sheep, so solicitous was he for her safety.

"Go on out there, Blighty! That's your job. Don't let anything happen to 'em. I don't need you, but if anything comes near the sheep, you get busy that minute, sir!"

He paused with a long look of anxious tenderness toward her, as though some premonition urged him to linger. Then, obedient but troubled, he trotted off to the flock.

Night. She lay alone upon the ground, gazing up at the stars that Vic knew. Gruffly he had taught her some of the names: Cancer, the Crab; and beautiful Virgo. . . .

When Vic lay thus, facing the firmament alone, he had a strange sense of letting go something—something that chained him to earth. It was like soaring to the highest point that a swing reaches—as if the law of gravitation were left below. He swung off into space with the Great Force. Sky, stars, earth, the universe, became one, and for the moment he fancied himself one with all. It never lasted; with a *thud* his mind would come back. But for the moment. . . .

But Effie's imagination was not tuned to flights like this. It kept within boundaries of the concrete and

the familiar. Sufficient for her to pretend that she was the heroine of "The Covered Wagon."

At length she rose from the ground, went into the little wagon house, folded her clothes neatly for the night, and went to bed.

§

She was wakened by an automobile purring toward the camp. Blinking, she sat up. Funny. The clock stared roundly in the moonlight; only ten minutes past one. What was Vic coming back for in the middle of the night?

She peeped between the front curtains. She could see the sheep, a peaceful slumbering throng. A dark spot beyond was the horse. Moonlight washed the plain with its icy fluid white; the buttes' forms seemed stepping forth from it, mysterious, slow. They were robed priests; they were threatening soldiers; Martians; beasts of a primeval earth; a desert caravan; the sinister procession of some secret clan.

She could not see the car, and its purring had ceased. Vic had left it, no doubt, where the road became bad, and was walking out to the wagon. Yes; she heard the footsteps. But why, at this time of night? Vague anxiety filled her. She went to the wagon's door, at the rear.

"Hello, Vic. Whatever'd you come back for this time o'——"

She stopped short. She saw a face like a coyote's, furtive, thievish. Bi Beady's face.

"Thought you might like comp'ny," Beady remarked agreeably. "Saw Trench in town—he mentioned you was stayin' out to the wagon all by your lonesome. So I thought I'd take a little run out. If 'twas a homely girl, I should worry. But the prettiest girl in the county ain't oughta be all by herself."

He had come close, she felt his breath. As yet she had not been able to speak or stir.

"You—you dirty stinker!" she gasped at length.

"Aw! Say! That ain't no way to talk to a gent what comes to cheer you up!" he urged facetiously. He said it as though this were a bit of farce that they were both playing; as though some understanding lay between them. She had never had any dealing with him; had merely seen him watching her at the two dances and remembered his coyote face. And yet there was an air of mutual comprehension in his manner.

He came closer, and his hands closed upon her upper arms. She jerked loose, retreated into the wagon. Beady followed; still with that matter-of-course air. Another moment, and the wagon, the bunk, were whirling about in her dazed brain. She battled. There was hot foul breath upon her face; the other face pressed closer, with its gleaming little red-rimmed eyes. . . .

"Aw, be good to me! What's the use foolin'?"

She struggled up, she was on her feet again, super-

humanly strong. She reached for the gun; he tried to stop her arm, but she had it.

"You get out this second or I'll fire."

"Aw, say!" But she could see fear skid across his face, even while he tried to keep up a sham of coaxing. His grip slackened, gave way. He stood looking at her with an air of injury and reproach, as though she had proved false.

"You'll find out I mean what I say. I'll treat you like what you are—a low-down coyote come to steal."

He backed off, scared but puzzled. "Steal! Say, that's good!" Evidently he was altogether surprised. He was at the door now, hesitating on the step. He was muttering sulkily. It was as though he had had a right to come. At last he made her understand.

"Don't see why you'd be so damn good to Trench an' not to me. I can give you a lot better time'n he can. An' I'll do it, too. I ain't no tightwad—not with a girl. What you playin' favourites for?"

So that was it. Yes, she understood now. She fired, and he ran. She knew that he could not be much hurt; indeed, she feared she had not hit him at all, until next morning showed a spatter of dried blood on the ground.

Beady made off at once in his car, like a prowler frightened off from the bedding ground. Blighty, tearing loose at last from the rope and muzzle with which Beady had quelled him, barked the car out of sight in a fury of hate. Effie lay awake through the hours of

the night, and saw the dawn break and the sun rise. . . . So *this* was what it came to.

§

Effie was preparing dinner when Vic arrived next day. He was in uncommonly high spirits. "Say, the county agent's sure going to put through the coöperative cars!" he announced.

It was strange that she did not reply, did not even greet him. Heavily she went on setting the table. He stood looking at her, puzzled. At length she paused before him.

"Las' night in the middle o' the night Bi Beady come here," she said in a voice of dull misery. "He heard you say I was at camp alone. I had to fight him. If I hadn'ta got ahold o' the gun I couldn't have escaped. . . . Then I shot, but he made a getaway."

She had expected an outburst, but it was not that. He stood with wide-open horrified eyes, as if he had been smitten and turned into something fixed, like an image, that would always stand that way.

She seemed weary, sapped. She placed the pepper and salt as if she didn't care any more. And yesterday the wagon house had been an enchanted palace.

"He acted like he thought o' course I'd be *willing*," she said. "Said he'd gimme a good time. Like he thought I was *that kind*."

He asked her a question. He whispered it, as if he couldn't find his voice.

"Did—did you *want* his 'good time'?"

"*Want* it! . . . I don't take to a human coyote."

She stood thoughtful, absently poking out the holes of the pepper and salt shakers with a pin. "The time I *did* have to hold on tight," she said reflectively, "was las' winter, when Mr. Handy wrote an' ast me. He's got a grand home in Newark—a dinner set, an' rose plush. He wanted to be reg'larly married, with a ring. *That* time, it was a temptation all right! I didn't want *him*, but when it's twenty-eight below zero an' a man offers you a steam-heated apartment and an eiderdown puff—*that* time, I had all I could do to keep straight."

It was the first time Vic had heard of Mr. Handy's proposal. For moments more he stared; then, very white, he wheeled about and strode from the wagon.

XXVI

§

WEEKS elapsed. Shearing time drew near. Vic had arranged to attend to this task, then start for the mountains with the band for a long stay. The year's harvest, the rich shearing of wool, would leave him debt-free, with a clean slate. He moved with a *whish* like wind. He swooped up work. He breathed with a full chest.

Effie was tingling with a new excitement—she was to have a flower garden, like Mrs. Coty's. The Belgian woman's flowers were the marvel of all who saw them. Year after year they bloomed for her, without irrigation, charmed forth by some magic that only her Belgian hands knew. Effie had seen the garden the summer before—it had lain flung out like a carpet of the Orient, a rainbow rug thrown upon the dun land—blue and yellow and crimson, pink and purple and green. Sweet peas scrambled up sticks and strings, held up their rose and lavender and magenta clusters like an Italian vender displaying his parti-coloured balloons. Like the balloons, the blossoms seemed tugging upward, as though striving to pull up their plants, root and all, and bear them off to the home of the winds. Marigolds

tossed back the sun's rays. Portulaca—maroon, yellow, white—crawled like spilled paint over the ground. Larkspurs burned their blue flame, coreopsis blew slenderly in the high wind, zinnias were a smeared palette of colour. Small blown snowdrifts between rows and patches, like a warning of winter to come, lay the white of candytuft.

It was a desert miracle. Nobody could guess how Mrs. Coty accomplished it in the midst of desolation. And the witch would stand looking at her garden, wise, brooding, unrevealing as Fate. She seemed to know secrets more subtle than those of watering pot and pruning shears. One day she said, all of a sudden, to Effie:

"You make garden, too. I show you trick."

Oh, but it would bloom! It would pour forth colour, perfume! Effie would have it in full swing when Vic returned from the mountains. She pictured him, coming in beside the band, catching sight of it from far off. Crimson and blue and purple and yellow and pink.

§

"Look at the woollies! Gosh, but they're heavy with the stuff! Maybe only a handful of sheep, way Westerners count, but I'll betcha there's a good load of sacks coming off their backs! Say, time we get 'em stripped we won't be wondering where the next meal's coming from!" So, as his wont was, Vic ran on to Blighty.

He ran on, too, in Effie's presence, though not ostensibly addressing her.

"Good work!" He was slashing open a parcel received in the mail, holding up new shears. "That mail-order house is on the job. They rushed 'em. Now we'll see the old idiots running around naked! Gosh, but they'll blat!" The new steel shot savage grins as he gnashed the blades.

"These came high." He was elated at his own extravagance; he would not have admitted that he enjoyed Effie's audience, that the male within him was strutting before the female, was spreading plumage. "But no good sinking any more money in poor stuff. They're the best steel, and you can take 'em apart for sharpening." He pecked at a screw, took them apart, put them together again, snapped their jaws. They conjured before him a drama; his imagination saw bleating, terrified beasts, wool piling like foothills, a harvest gathered in greedy-mouthed sacks. When Effie said they looked cruel, he told her it was nothing to ancient days when the wool was pulled from the skin.

Rufus Snake Head and another Gros Ventre came. Shearing began.

§

They were off. Snip, slash, snap, gash—shears gnashing their teeth, beasts shuddering, bleating, battling in fear—wool falling, soft, dirty, drifting, heaping—the stench of animal life—hurry, cut—a spurt of

blood, a shriek of pain—strained, beseeching eyes. . . .

Vic stood over his men proudly. "His men." "His sheep." Only a few hundred animals where others possessed thousands; only two old Indians, where others directed a great crew; but he was a lord of lands. He walked about, watching sharply, commanding, criticizing.

"'Kout there, Rufe! Don't get too careless! If you cut 'em too deep I'll have a job to heal 'em up."

"Rrrrh!" grunted Rufus in disgust at this Easterner's absurd caution. "No hurt! Yell, like squaw—good!" Rufus slashed a bit more ruthlessly. The Indians' shears flew and flashed; their eyes flashed, too; they were primitive, they liked to hear the old sheep crying in pain, the young lambs bleating in wild fright. They liked to feel the struggle of tormented animals in their hands; to seize a creature by the hind leg and force it to the ground, to hold it there with the knee, to slash away the wool with swift reckless strokes. They liked to see a spatter of blood flash forth and drip upon the ground. They were two stolid, more or less law-abiding old Indians, and one of them was ruled by a potato masher; but the past of savage man sprang and peeped through the curtain of the present. Ferocity gleamed in their eyes, in their greedy shears.

But to Effie, Rufus Snake Head was a knight of gallantry. This white woman had danced at his tribe's celebration, and she was his lady of grace for evermore. He was a worthless enough specimen of humanity—fre-

quently drunk, seldom at work, sordid, without ambition: the product of a conquest and a system of which the white race has little to be proud. He might be good for little more than to draw his allowance from our government and spend it for bad liquor; but he could worship—in silent service and grunts.

§

"Say, you Jim, you've left a bunch o' wool on that lamb's belly. Get it off. Don't waste a particle." As a matter of fact, James Weasel Tail had cleaned the lamb bare, but Vic swelled in lordship.

§

And now the shorn beasts were gathering, a naked, wretched group, under Blighty's charge. Stripped to the last ounce of wool, they were let go to meet the world as best they could. Cowering, still terrified, chilled by the sudden stripping in the keen wind, they huddled for mutual protection.

Shrinking thus, they looked ashamed. One might have fancied that they shared this advanced form of self-consciousness with humankind. Their misery was both poignant and humorous; they seemed to long to hide themselves from sight.

But, although they shivered in the wind, although blood was caking in brownish-red blotches upon the ground, no suffering really mattered if only they could find their own again. Ewes and lambs had been sepa-

rated in the handling; driven into a corral for the shearing, taken to the operation in groups; there had been grievous partings. Here a shorn lamb cried pathetically for its mother; there a ewe sent forth wail after wail summoning her offspring, while it lay helpless on its side, bleeding and screaming, under the onslaught of the shears.

§

Effie had gone over to the Darlington farm to see Rachel. She had told Vic good-bye; he was to start for the mountains at once with the sheep. She wanted to stay and wave him off, but he grumped at her, "Go 'long. What you waiting for? I don't have to be wrapped up and my leggings put on!" She knew that he would not turn back once to wave. But she knew, also, that he would want to, and she twinkled at herself.

She had packed all sorts of delicious stores in the wagon for him to find. Brown crocks of baked beans and of butter. Pies and biscuits and bread. Stewed dried fruit in jars. Her own jelly. A feast awaited him.

David gathered the band, saw that the wagon was in good shape, and summoned Blighty. All was ready. David would be Effie's right-hand-man about the place.

"'By, Mr. Trench," David said.

"'By. Be good to yourself." Vic permitted himself sometimes a touch of geniality when it wasn't a woman. A woman—if you said so much as good-morning to one, she'd think you were getting soft. Think you were

making love to her. Sappy, women were. Give 'em an inch and they'd take an ell. Had to hold 'em off with tongs, or they'd spring some lovey-doviness. Sappy.

"Come on, Blight!"

Barks of intense excitement sprang forth in a burst. Into the mountains—away off—on a new and glorious adventure this splendid day! the barks cried.

"Hot stuff, Blight!"

They were starting. The sheep ran bleating as if they, too, sensed the thrill of it all. Just as he passed from his own land, Vic remembered that he had left his muffler. He would need it in the cold heights. He ran back to the house.

The muffler was not in its usual place, and he went to a bureau where Effie kept her things, and rummaged. It had never before occurred to him to open these drawers. They were filled with socks and underwear to be darned, aprons in the making, and such woman's truck. Now, in an impatient hurry, he turned over everything, making havoc. At length he found himself picking up some unfamiliar object.

He held it up and, puzzled, looked at it. It was very small, of soft white fabric. He discovered that he was holding it before himself by two tiny ridiculous sleeves.

§

When he had found the muffler and was setting off again, he tiptoed out of the house, though he could not

have told why. Nor could he have guessed how his face appeared. He passed David without a word now, and started in an unnatural silence, with the sheep.

Blighty studied him. On Vic's face an awe, a consciousness of marvel was written. Then, of a sudden, the hush broke.

His chest swelled visibly, prodigiously. His fantastic height grew higher. He towered like a giant of fable. He strutted. He snatched off his hat, to fling his head free in the glorious wind; his black crest reared itself like that of some exotic bird.

"Gosh!" he shouted to the wilderness.

He puffed himself out, he swaggered. He whistled a triumphant tune. He behaved as though he had taken a city.

XXVII

§

FIRS reared themselves before Vic's mountain camp, cold peaks pierced his sky. At night he now and then heard thin cries far off, but no enemy came near. The band fattened; not a loss among them, and their sides swelling with the fresh green feed.

Minute streams like threads of gray silk floss wove here and there, glittering tricklets from the snowy peaks. The sheep ate up the little streams; they would bite at them with their crumpled mouths, gobbling grass, rivulet and all.

Vic would open the brown crocks, unwrap a crusty loaf, and spread himself a meal. He ate like a Viking. He was big of chest and ravenous. He whistled and bellowed strange songs. Constantly he strutted. He talked to the stars in a patronizing tone.

"Say, Hercules, old boy, at the same stand, are you? So you think you're a giant, do you! That sideshow business isn't what it used to be. But it's your only line, Herc. Better stick where you are."

§

He would move his camp from time to time to give the sheep new grazing ground. Twice he visited remote dwellings and laid in fresh supplies. Then off, deeper into the mountains, the adventure growing ever keener. There were steep passes now; a cañon, a precipice. Here a cliff face, bare as infinity, sheer, pitching below the winding mountain trail where he led the flock. He would come upon such a drop all at once, emerging from the trees; it made him jump, and shout to the band.

§

No longer could idle and gloomy broodings find room in his brain. They were completely crowded out by a new purpose, such as had never been there before, such as he had never guessed he could entertain. Queer idea.

It was roused by the things she had told him. About Bi Beady. And about the little rich grocer with the rose-plush flat. Mr. Handy, she called him.

He had wanted to kill Beady, but that discreet youth had, it seemed, left the country. Always like a coyote, he had sneaked off to a hiding place at dawn.

And Handy. Way off in Newark, New Jersey. Should he leap over those hundreds upon hundreds of miles and get the sleek grocer by the throat? A steam-heated flat, he had offered her, with fine furniture, on Easy Street. So! Thought he'd get her, didn't he, with his smart proposal of marriage, and his luxury!

Handy'd find out whose she was! Anybody that tried butting in would find out!

And then the thought came to him that it had been up to her. She could have gone to Handy at once, had she chosen. Nothing to stop her. And she had stuck.

All this that he was thinking of had been known to him for some time. But it was only now, in his lonely camp of many silences, that he seemed to penetrate the meaning of it all. Only now that its deeper significance took hold of him. In the utter solitude of the mountains, at last he fully grasped the truth of this woman. This ridiculous child-woman, with her bobbed hair and her wrinkling, funny nose that sniffed so gleefully into adventure, and her "My lollipop!" The woman who had had her chance to go—to have comfort, to have married ease—and had turned from them in order to "keep straight"; and had stuck.

It was when a certain moment flashed before his memory that he would suddenly seem to see *into* her, as if she were lighted up inside. Oddly, it was the moment when he had found himself holding up that preposterously small garment by its sleeves.

. . . "Nowadays every boy's got to have a college education. I won't have his broken off short, way mine was."

. . . Yes, he resumed, let 'em try to butt in. He'd show the grocer, he'd show anybody whose she was. They'd find out. . . .

One night, while he was lying beside the embers of his

camp fire, a thought almost as distinct as a voice seemed to reply to him, from his subconscious mind. It said, "There's one way to keep off the Beadys and the Handys. And only one way."

He sat up, prickling with the suddenness of it. He was on a bed of pine needles, the wheeling stars above him, the silences of earth and wind and stars and heaven wrapping him. On the instant he knew what he was going to do—as soon as he got back. It was the one way to keep 'em off.

"I'll show 'em! Think they'll grab her out from under my nose, do they? Lasso her with a wedding ring! Think they'll get her! I'll show 'em who's bossing my outfit. They think I haven't any legal right. It doesn't take long to get a license! I'll have her married so quick and so solid they won't dare to look at her. Like to see anybody keep me from marrying that woman! She's *mine*, they better find out in a hurry. Hh! So—they think they can stop it, do they?"

And so, as his fantasy had once raged at imagined enemies who had demanded that he marry this woman against his will, so it now raged at those whom he pictured standing in the way. He'd marry her in spite of 'em. Who had any right to say he shouldn't? As though he had all along been battling for his rights to marriage, as though at last he were mowing down opposition.

And still another fantasy. "Think they can pick

on the kid, do they? Let 'em try! He's going to be fixed up all straight, as good as any kid in the county. They'll be laughing out o' the other side their mouths if they try *that*. It's my kid. It's a boy."

Male, possessive, this new determination obsessed him. He could hardly wait for time to return. He'd have her locked tight up to him the day he got back. No dilly-dally. She might want to wait to fix up a veil or something. Bunk. Nothing doing. Get right on the job, just the way she was. Right off. Married. Solid, tight. She was his. He'd show everybody whose she was.

He was but a condensed history of male possessiveness. At first man took the woman he wanted and bore her off to his cave without ceremony. Later, he found it expedient to invent the marriage law in order to brand his property and hold it against intruders.

§

The mountain heights were cold. Vic wrapped himself heavily in blankets during the nights when he lay upon leaves and pine needles, rolled close for warmth. One night a coyote howled none too far off; then another cry cut the silence, a long-drawn dreadful wail, and the first voice died on the instant. No coyote asserts himself when the mountain lion is about. Vic sat up with a start and seized his gun, and for many nights following he slept little.

But trouble did not come. The sheep were nowadays

living a charmed life. It all seemed like prophecy. His luck had turned at last, he told himself; things were coming his way, after all. He stared at the stars and listened to the firs, and the future unreeled before him. A sheep man, he saw himself, the real thing—owner of vast flocks; his name known, a scientific stock raiser, one of the state's outstanding men. A fine ranch house, a foreman named Dave Olefsky, men under him, servants in the house. . . . Some class, that house. These days, you could live twenty-seven miles from town and yet live in luxury if you had the price. And he'd have it, all right. No wife and child of his should have to scrimp along. He was going to make the outfit pay, and they'd know what easy living meant.

And the stars wheeled on in their courses.

XXVIII

§

EFFIE stood off and viewed her garden. It was splendid now; a riot of magenta and orange and blue and mauve and pink and white and maize. The wind tore through it like a gangster and flung the flowers about; they shook themselves out and, annoyed, rearranged their petals daintily after it had passed.

What a carpet of Persia it was, seen at a distance! When she came home from a visit to Rachel, she thought how it would look to Vic returning from the mountains. She hurried to train up the sweet peas. It was almost time for him.

§

Effie lived with long thoughts these days.

Once, when David was driving her, they came to a sugar-beet field to which an irrigation company had brought foreign labourers. Women were toiling in the field, their babies snuggled in miniature tents while the mothers hoed beside them, wallowing in the mire of irrigation.

"That's a fine kid you got!" Effie cried, watching a woman poke her head and shoulders in at the flap of a

tent no bigger than a hen coop, and emerge with a gurgling baby.

"Ya. Good kid. No cry."

The woman sat down on a lump of damp earth and unbuttoned her dress. A huge succulent white breast sprang forth—moist, spilling its nutriment in bounty. A breast like fertile earth to nourish the nations. The baby felt about with grunting, ravenous mouth and seized upon it.

Effie felt something well up high and almost choke her. "Ain't it grand!" she murmured.

"Ya. O. K." The woman summed up this world, its work, maternity, life in general, and turned away to her baby, which was suckling with a hungry noise like the noise of dry earth drinking rain.

Back at home Effie sat by herself in the gathering dusk. She was not able to see her friends much nowadays, they lived so far off, and going was harder. She had not seen Rachel lately, or Mrs. Coty, or Mrs. Olefsky. As for Em and Uly—they had not returned in all these months, owing to his attack of inflammatory rheumatism.

And yet Effie was not lonely. Once she would have felt so, but now. . . . It was strange, how real it was—a person, actually; a companion.

She sat outside on the grocer's box that served as doorstep, and watched the garden fade with the day. She was very happy. But she was perplexed, too. Queerly mixed her mind was these days.

The White Flowers of a Blameless Life had ceased to disturb her, when it had been just *herself*. They had left her feeling alone; but she had got along by forgetting their punishment. But now—now, it wasn't any longer just herself. What ought she to do about it? Sometimes she would be harassed by perplexity. She couldn't stand it to have the kid treated badly. . . .

But the ultimate sum total of all of Effie's reflections was no more than a miserable bewilderment. This strange world-made distinction between morality and immorality she had never been able to grasp any more than she would have grasped a logarithm or a syllogism. It was, to her, fourth-dimensional; it no more existed than it exists to a bird that mates for life, that sings and toils for one nest only, that droops and perishes if the one life-love be broken. Truth, to Effie, was honest self-expression; she was completely instinctive; and sitting on a grocer's box and vexing herself with the problem was not going to make her less so. . . .

And Vic never would, anyway, she knew. . . .

And then, overflowing the questions, in would wash that flood of happiness. Comfort, companionship, home. . . . The night wind blowing over miles of sagebrush, the fragrance of her garden, of flowers that blossomed and poured forth scent in the friendly dark. Before long Vic would be returning—already he must be travelling down from mountain fastnesses, already

drawing near. Soon the sound of far-off bells, of a familiar bark would reach her ear.

When he came, she would tell him. So many times she had started to; but the remembrance of his opinion once expressed had made her shy. He didn't like 'em, he had said; they yowled.

XXIX

§

VIC was many days late. On his way back, while the sheep were crossing a ravine, a coyote stampeded the band, driving them over a high cut-bank. The animals went into a panic, and a pile-up was threatened; they rushed together in desperate fright, heaping on top of one another. The pile-up was one of the disasters of old-time sheep-raising, with its dire result of smothering; but so skilfully did Vic handle the situation that the animals spread again and were safe before disaster could come.

He changed his route after this, to avoid the prowlers. It made him indignant to be forced to do so. A lot of time lost. Many additional miles to be travelled. Gosh, wouldn't he ever get back! He wanted to *get* there, to get that thing attended to. He'd show 'em. . . .

§

Crossing the last stretch of barren ground, he saw the carpet of Persia spread before him. In the midst of a dun world it glowed like an oriental fabric; it seemed unreal, a mirage. Something felt queer in his throat,

like the night he had first found himself driving home to a light.

The sheep gabbled beside him, Blighty barked, the horses trudged with the wagon. He was dust-smeared and tired, but that carpet—a wealth of luxury, it looked—spread before his feet. It was as though she had spread it to welcome him. Would she come? . . .

But it was somebody else standing at the door, waiting for him, it seemed. She must be just behind. This, he made out, was Em Pinker. . . .

And at that moment he knew. Uncanny, the way he knew it. As though his mind had known it all along but hadn't told him. A bright gift is now and then placed in our hands in this life . . . a gift too bright, perhaps, for us to hold. . . .

§

"They went together—it was too soon—yes, a boy. . . ."

He heard Em's voice seemingly at a great distance, over miles of empty space. "Uly an' me, we jus' got back a few days ago an' we hadn't seen her an' didn't know how things was. Then in the night Dave he come over in the car to git me, an' to use our 'phone. The doctor he got here all right—he come right off in his car—but 'twan't no use. . . . Poor child, I wouldn't be s'prised if one trouble was her workin' at that garden, not reelizin'. Dave he says she was talkin' about it every livelong minute. She'd grab a bucket o' water to

lug it 'fore she'd think as how she mustn't. She did want them flowers so bad. She wanted to make it look nice fur you to come back to, I 'xpect."

He stood staring at the buttons on Em Pinker's dress. He counted them—five, six, seven. Vaguely he knew that she was coaxing him to eat. She was saying, "ham an' eggs—they'll make you feel better, poor lamb." . . . Five, six, seven. . . . Button, button, jingled his mind, who's got the button. . . .

XXX

§

THE earth. In the beginning you're dumped on to it, you've got to take it as you find it, and in the end it takes you. The earth. A short trip across its surface, and then the end. He stood staring at it. The earth.

His thoughts were ashes—the ashes of design, of ambition, of hope, of a passion he had never admitted even to himself. Gray sinking ashes.

§

From the ashes something at length seemed struggling to arise. He tried to make it out—what was it? It was a vague new sense of that same earth.

Not a mere creature of clay now, ready to open and swallow you when it wanted a fresh mouthful. Something more friendly than that. More like a mother: a being that bore you, and cared for you, and in the end tucked you away for a long peaceful sleep. It was the earth that Effie had known; she had spoken to it. She had come to it and it had opened its arms to her and she had dwelt happily in its toil and its understanding,

and in the end it had cuddled her in and told her good-night. . . .

A shove, Hamlin had said. Everybody had to give it. A shove, to keep evolution moving on. . . .

He thought of the A. E. F., the ex-service men who had struggled and failed and gone from these parts. He was the only one left. People said they were quitters, that they had failed to carry on. He alone had resisted, had held. It was as though he were staying *for* something, as though some thread of purpose bound him to greater issues.

He recalled that not one of the rest, except Peary, had had a woman beside him.

§

For days of purgatory his plans had been tossing like waves, back and forth, lashing him about. He would go East. He would go to Calgary. He would go to California. To the Philippines, to Texas, to France—what did it matter where? What was the grain of sand that one ant brought to the ant-hill, the hill that a giant foot would one day demolish?

But now, as he was walking aimlessly beside the garden, not seeing it, not knowing that its perfumes were drenching the air, his foot caught in one of the sweet-pea strings. . . . He stopped, staring at the plants. . . .

Gosh, she must have worked for such a blooming!

As though it counted, one little individual effort toward beauty in a desert. From the time she had cut up her costume slip (which she had never admitted to him) to create bright adornment in a dreary shanty, how she had struggled to put beauty into the drabness! More than physical beauty; another, rather, of which the costume slip and the garden were but symbols; it was the spiritual significance of that beauty for which she had wrought. . . .

Suddenly he had the freakish fancy of being picked up and swung into her current of thought, as if he were lifted and set down inside her mind for the moment. He knew what she would be thinking, if she were here. Of how they had builded together. And of how she had wanted to stick. She would be wanting it now, if she knew—that *he* should stick, right here in this hell of a country. Here. Because it was home, and because they had set out to carry on, and because they had stuck where others quit. As though she said, "I gave a shove, the biggest I could in a year. Now it's up to you to keep on, even alone. Keep the shove moving!"

He sat down to think, on a box that sheltered her young nasturtiums. It creaked and shuddered at his weight. He sat very still, staring at the thought. . . . To stick. . . .

Funny, that way she always said, "My lollipop!" . . .

THE END

REINDEL